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Using a “woman’s wit and cunning”: Marie Belloc Lowndes Rewrites the Ripper

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<1>In the autumn of 1888, the infamous killer Jack the Ripper struck London’s impoverished East End, killing and gruesomely mutilating at least five women. Although the perpetrator was never caught, his crimes ignited a cultural sensation; press reports of the murders were devoured voraciously by the public, and debates about the causes of the crimes dominated public discourse. Despite this intense public interest and a multitude of more-or-less factual publications about the case, however, the first full-length novelization of the Ripper’s crimes did not appear until Marie Belloc Lowndes’ *The Lodger* (1913).

<2>In January, 1911, Lowndes had published a short story in the American monthly *McClure’s Magazine* entitled “The Lodger,” based on the Jack the Ripper case. In one of her memoirs, Lowndes explains the story’s provenance:

I had once sat at dinner next to a man who told me that a butler and lady’s maid, who had been in his parents’ service, had married, and set up a humble lodging-house. They were convinced Jack the Ripper had spent the night in their house before and after he had committed the most horrible of his murders. I told myself that this might form the core of a striking short story.
(*Merry Wives* 171)

Although the idea of the Ripper-as-lodger became increasingly common in the decades following the murders and is not original to Lowndes, her short story is almost certainly the first published fictional expression of the motif.⁽¹⁾ Lowndes went on to develop the short story into a novel of the same name which was published serially in England in the *Daily Telegraph*, and then as a single volume in 1913.

<3>In this novel, a female character assumes the role of unofficial detective, exhibiting both agency and power as she investigates the killer's crimes. Lowndes demonstrates how a "woman's wit and cunning" (77) is able to solve the mystery when thousands of police officers, detectives and government officials are unable to. Breaking from all previous textual Ripper narratives, Lowndes highlights the lack of female agency in earlier accounts of the murders, and presents the argument that the absence of women in the case precludes the possibility of the mystery ever being solved. In this way, the novel makes the provocative suggestion that the problem of male violence cannot be solved within the confines of male-dominated systems of knowledge. The Ripper murders terrified women throughout London and beyond, coming to represent a violent, misogynist threat against *all* women as a "mythic story of sexual danger" (Walkowitz 2). It is only in a novel published twenty-five years after the crimes that a female author and her female protagonist assume imaginative control over their tormentor. In Lowndes' reimagining of the case, women are at last "able to enter discourses from which they have been initially excluded," and move "from objects of another's discourse to women as subjects of their own" (Poovey 29).

<4>The novel was immediately popular with the book-buying public. Lowndes reports, "in thirty-five years over a million copies of the novel were sold, and it has been translated into almost every language" (*Merry Wives* 172). However much the novel earned, though, it was not a critical success—at least, not until long after Lowndes' death. She recalls, "*The Lodger*, on publication, was hailed by the critics with universal condemnation, and when I tried to find a few lines suitable for quotation, when the novel was about to be published in America by Scribner's, I failed" (*Merry Wives* 92). Decades later, the novel was lauded by writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein as a fine example of crime fiction (Marcus xi), although it is still not usually considered a canonical entry in the genre.(2)

<5>As a fictionalized adaptation, *The Lodger* takes artistic liberties with the factual events of the Ripper murders, although it is also true to its source material in many ways. The plot of both the short story and novel versions of the narrative details the experience of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting, a retired butler and maid, who take in a mysterious lodger (improbably named "Mr. Sleuth") in order to avert the financial ruin that continually threatens their household. Both the short story and the novel employ limited omniscient third-person narration, mostly from Mrs. Bunting's point of view, with occasional diversions to Mr. Bunting's perspective. Over the course of the story, first Mrs. Bunting and eventually Mr. Bunting as well begin to suspect that their strange lodger is in fact "the Avenger," an insane criminal terrorizing the streets of London,

killing women with apparent abandon. Neither Bunting nor his wife report their suspicions to the police, fearing the financial loss his arrest would entail, despite the fact that their young friend and sole visitor Joe Chandler is himself a policeman.⁽³⁾ Gradually, a strange bond of sympathy develops between Mrs. Bunting and her lodger. The story ends, dramatically, in Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors, where Mr. Sleuth has unexpectedly invited Mrs. Bunting and her step-daughter Daisy to celebrate the girl's eighteenth birthday. Seeing a policeman who is there only by coincidence, Sleuth assumes Mrs. Bunting has turned him in, and disappears after castigating her for her betrayal. As the plot concludes, Daisy becomes engaged to Joe, the Buntings give up their lodging house and return to domestic service, and Mr. Sleuth disappears—in the full-length version, seemingly into thin air, and in the short story, into Regent's Canal, where he drowns.

<6>Surprisingly scant academic attention has been paid to Lowndes' work, despite her fame and success in her own time. By the time of her death in 1947, Lowndes' bibliography included some 44 novels, seven short stories, seven plays, four volumes of memoirs, and several biographies, along with a vast body of journalistic output.⁽⁴⁾ *The Lodger*, however, is the sole novel for which Lowndes is remembered. And although several volumes of literary biography and genre bibliography include entries on Lowndes and her work, there are as yet very few scholarly articles or books on the novel or novelist. While the file of academic writings on Lowndes is thus slight, most scholars agree that gender plays an important role in her work. They disagree, however, about whether Lowndes' depictions of women indicate a conservative, or a more progressively feminist viewpoint. Virginia Macdonald, in her brief entry on Lowndes in the compendium *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, observes that Lowndes' texts "share a sensitive understanding of women's problems" (969). However, she goes on to argue that Lowndes' female characters tend to be portrayed negatively, often undergoing a transformation from sympathetic heroines to criminals "who abuse the love and affection of trusting males" (969). She concludes, "The horror of her books comes from this stripping away the façade of seemingly respectable women to show how greed or passion could lead them to murder" (969). Barrie Hayne, in a similar compendium, agrees, arguing that "in at least ten of her novels, the pattern is repeated of a young woman, usually of an inferior class, who is married to an older man but loves another (or, more usually, has designs on another man's money), who murders her husband" (198). He describes Lowndes' "ultimate theme" as "the very Victorian one of outward respectability and hidden vice. One can be transformed by some psychic quirk from a respectable wife to a murderess, and who can tell the difference?" (199). And Mary Jean DeMarr, in *British Mystery Writers, 1860-1919*, focuses on Mrs. Bunting's "willful self-deception" (202) as the main thematic impulse of *The Lodger*. The image of

...and her reception (2017) as the main thematic impulse of *The Lodger*. The image of women in Lowndes' fiction is thus assumed by these scholars to be unremittingly negative.

<7>In contrast, the authors of the two sole full-length academic texts on Marie Belloc Lowndes, Laura Marcus and Joseph Kestner, respectively, consider Lowndes to be a decidedly feminist writer. Laura Marcus's 1996 introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Lodger*, while arguing that the novel is more about class than gender, also considers the issue of Lowndes' attitude towards women. Marcus writes:

the emphasis in the novel on women's "natural" desire to build and protect their 'nests' does not suggest a radical feminism. Yet Belloc Lowndes does seem to suggest that women's exclusion from civic life may weaken their concepts of "good citizenship" and even make them sympathetic to other outsiders, criminals included. (xx)

Lowndes' feminism, in Marcus's estimation, is manifested in her treatment of Mrs. Bunting as an agent (perhaps *the* agent) in the novel, rather than as an object or victim. Kestner's chapter on *The Lodger* in his 2003 book *Sherlock's Sisters*, agrees with much of Marcus's analysis. Kestner too emphasizes the "class conscious desperation" (214) of the novel, and suggests, like Marcus, that "Being an outcast, a woman can ignore or go beyond the law, the privilege of the disenfranchised" (39). Kestner, however, locates Mrs. Bunting's disenfranchisement in her status as a "bastard" foundling child (217), and in the religious oppression of patriarchal interpretations of the Bible (216).

<8>It is, as both Marcus and Kestner observe, somewhat unusual for a female character to be cast in the role of detective, even unofficially. (In fact, Kestner's book documents and analyses the trend.) Although Joe Chandler is employed by the Metropolitan Police as a detective, he is shown to be entirely ineffective, particularly when compared to Mrs. Bunting's highly successful sleuthing activities. Lowndes, as we shall see, roots Mrs. Bunting's detective skills in her body: at various stages throughout her investigation, she experiences physical reactions—exclamations of embodied female knowledge—that point her towards vital evidence. Further, Lowndes continually highlights the gendered nature of Mrs. Bunting's body, and uses the resultantly "feminine traits" Mrs. Bunting exhibits to aid in her investigation. As Carla T. Kungl argues, this is a common tactic for female writers of detective fiction:

Women writers use traits which extended from what society thought of as women's naturally detail-oriented lives—knowledge of the domestic sphere

and of 'natural' female intuition—as key crime-solving tools. Instead of seeing traditionally female traits as handicaps, women writers provide their female detectives with these tools emanating from their status [as women]. (56)

Although she does not refer specifically to Lowndes, Kungl contends that women like Lowndes, who imagined different roles for female characters, actually “helped create new images women” (57), thereby expanding their life experiences and challenging strict social codes of gendered behaviour. Certainly, Lowndes’ imaginative appropriation of the Ripper case inserts females into roles to which they previously had no access, offering an extraordinary narrative reframing in which women have access to both knowledge and agency, and are no longer powerless in the face of the threat represented by the Avenger/Ripper.

<9>Lowndes uses several techniques to challenge pre-existing Ripper narratives that ignore women’s agency and type-cast them as victims, exclude women from official channels of power and knowledge, and ultimately deny women a voice even in matters of their own physical safety. Most significantly, by focusing on Mrs. Bunting and her experiences, Lowndes is able to reframe the Ripper narrative as a domestic tale with a female protagonist—a female who is represented not as a victim, but as an active agent in the case. Lowndes highlights the lack of representation of victims’ voices, and foregrounds Mrs. Bunting’s body as a site of information and truth in the case. By contrasting a female-based system of information gathering and knowledge with the official, male channels of justice (the police and courts), Lowndes has written a profoundly feminist text, one that challenges the representations of women in previous Ripper narratives, and puts forth a passionate argument for female social equality. Lowndes showcases several channels of official knowledge and power, which she sets up in opposition to Mrs. Bunting’s own information-gathering techniques, and the power they grant her. Invariably, she suggests that the official channels of knowledge are misguided and failing, thereby implying that a merger between the two sides of this gendered dyad is necessary for the optimal effectiveness of social institutions, and for the creation of a social structure in which women are on equal footing with men. The particular social institutions Lowndes focuses on are the police, the newspapers, and the courts.

<10>The police, as a larger entity, are represented within the novel by Joe Chandler, the young detective friend of Bunting’s, whose grandfather Bunting had worked for in his youth. Joe is a likeable character—generous to the Buntings, solicitous to his beloved Daisy, and always willing to share information and exciting stories about the case he is

working, which just happens to be the Avenger case. These chats are almost always between him and Bunting; Mrs. Bunting does not participate, and listens “with a certain languid interest” (29) at first, and with silent terror as her suspicions grow. Luckily for Mrs. Bunting and her lodger, however, Joe is not particularly bright, nor does he describe the police force in overly optimistic terms. The first bit of news he imparts to the Buntings is that “the Yard’s nettled—that’s what it is, and we’re all on our mettle—that we are” (30). When asked specifically about his own views of the case, Joe replies, “I don’t know what to think. I’m fair puzzled” (47). And finally, when Bunting hints to him that he believes the Avenger might be a gentleman lodging in the West End—practically begging Joe to consider Mr. Sleuth—Joe misses the tip-off.

“D’you mean that The Avenger may be a toff, staying in some West End hotel, Mr. Bunting? Well, things almost as funny as that ’ud be have come to pass.” He smiled as if he found the notion a funny one ... “Why, ’twould be like looking for a needle in a field of hay, Mr. Bunting! But there! I don’t think it’s anything quite so unlikely as that—not myself I don’t.” (186)

Joe even declares, “I don’t believe he’ll ever be caught” (70), expressing little faith in the law-keeping organization of which he is a part. And indeed, the 5,000 constables working the case are unable to prevent the murders that Mrs. Bunting could stop with a single word. The police, then, appear inept, and the network of shared information that develops between Joe and Bunting is proven by Mrs. Bunting, again and again, to be based on misinformation.

<11>As Joe and Bunting exchange information nearly every day about the case, Mrs. Bunting usually feigns disinterest. When Joe brings news about a description the police are planning to circulate, Mrs. Bunting slips into the room without being observed: “she was still standing with her back against the door, looking at the group in front of her. None of them were thinking of her—she thanked God for that! She could hear everything that was said without joining in the talk and excitement” (59). But her exclusion from the group is not always by choice. Slightly earlier, she appears to get upset at news of the latest—double—murder.

“Ellen?” [Bunting] said warningly, “Ellen, now do have a care! I can’t think what’s come over you about these murders. Turn your mind away from them, do! We needn’t talk about them—not so much, that is –”
“But I wants to talk about them,” cried Mrs. Bunting hysterically.
The husband and wife were standing, one each side of the table, the man with his back to the fire, the woman with her back to the door. (52)

Afraid of the murders' effects on his wife's mind, Bunting attempts to exclude her from sharing their information about the case. This forces the couple into an adversarial position, with Mrs. Bunting on the outside looking in.

<12>Bunting comes into more direct contact with the world of professional policing when Joe takes him and Daisy to visit the Black Museum at Scotland Yard, a gallery of crime paraphernalia from the most famous criminal cases in Britain. In many ways, this is a monument to both the efficacy and the failure of the British police force: a catalogue of crimes that have been solved, but not prevented. Notably, Mrs. Bunting does not accompany them, although she is invited along. In fact, the chapter that encompasses the museum visit (IX) is the first to take place outside of Mrs. Bunting's domestic space, and she rarely leaves her home. Of the museum, she says, "Twould turn me sick" (63), and refuses to go for reasons of bodily illness. As we shall see, however, Mrs. Bunting has no need to venture into the building "where throbs the heart of that great organism which fights the forces of civilized crime" (63)—she has more insight into the Avenger case than anyone there. Again, a body metaphor is used, with the body of the police force compared, implicitly and unfavourably, to the divergent embodied knowledge held by Mrs. Bunting. Although the chapter reads like a crime procedural (Joe takes Bunting and Daisy past the Fingerprint Identification Room, and explains various stages of investigation and capture), the fact remains that all of these professional men, with all the science, money and power behind them, are unable to obtain the knowledge that Mrs. Bunting already has: the identity of the Avenger.

<13>Newspapers, too, are an official body for the purveyance of knowledge, and they, like the police, come in for criticism in *The Lodger*. Despite the fact that the novel itself was published serially in a newspaper, Lowndes uses her narrative to interrogate newspapers as purveyors of facts. By doing this, she highlights the clashing modes of representation that exist in newspaper reports of the crimes, and in her novel. Newspapers are coded throughout the text as male; Mr. Bunting buys and reads the papers, and Mrs. Bunting often disapproves of this indulgence. He is described one afternoon as buying papers "recklessly—in fact, he must have spent the best part of sixpence" (119), a large expense for a household so recently on the edge of financial ruin. When Mrs. Bunting does read a newspaper, she does so on the sly, early in the morning when no one is watching. And afterwards, she covers her tracks. Lowndes writes, "Slowly and carefully Mrs. Bunting folded the paper up again in its original creases, and then she stooped and put it back down on the mat where she had found it" (48). Her participation in this channel of knowledge is illicit.

<14>Further, the newspapers are shown to get their information wrong at times. There are several instances in which Bunting learns facts from Joe that “hadn’t been recorded in his newspaper” (30). They also behave irresponsibly towards their publics. In fact, Joe blames the newspapers for allowing the Avenger to continue his crime spree. He explains to Bunting:

It’s all along of them blarsted papers that The Avenger went to work a different way this time . . . The newspapers was always saying how extraordinary it was that The Avenger chose such a peculiar time to do his deeds—I mean, the time when no one’s about the streets. Now, doesn’t it stand to reason that the fellow, reading all that, and seeing the sense of it, said to himself, “I’ll go on another tack this time”? (121)

Of course, Mr. Sleuth reads only the Bible and his concordance,⁽⁵⁾ but Mrs. Bunting gleans bits of information from the papers, as we have seen. Several of her hints to him are based on this information; the papers, indeed, prolong the criminal career of the Avenger.

<15>The last official channel of knowledge *The Lodger* interrogates is the legal system. It illustrates the ways in which the court’s treatment of women does a disservice not just to women themselves, but also to any concept of authentic justice. Mrs. Bunting’s decision to secretly attend the inquest into one of the murders is perhaps surprising, but her sole reason for attending is to ascertain whether or not her lodger is a suspect in the case. Moreover, she would not even have access to the public inquest without the help of a friendly police officer who mistakes her for a sister-in-law of the victim—again, typecasting women as victims rather than agents. He walks her into court, saying “Lucky you met me . . . You’d never have got through alone” (135). Even with this access, however, the officer escorts her out before the medical evidence is presented (149). Once in court, Mrs. Bunting is amazed to see all the prominent gentlemen assembled. She thinks to herself,

How strange, how amazing, to reflect that from all parts of London, from their doubtless important avocations, one unseen, mysterious beckoner had brought all these men here together, to this sordid place, on this bitterly cold, dreary day. Here they were, all thinking of, talking of, evoking one unknown, mysterious personality—that of the shadowy and yet terribly real human being who chose to call himself The Avenger. And somewhere, not so very far away from them all, The Avenger was keeping these clever, astute, highly trained minds—aye, and bodies, too—at bay (136-137)

astute, highly trained minds—eye, and bodies, too—at bay. (100–101)

This, then, is the heart of the Avenger's appeal for Mrs. Bunting: his nearly absolute power over the London elite. For a marginalized woman who couldn't even attend a public inquest without male intervention, the Avenger's power to assemble many of the most important men in the city is overwhelming.

<16>Mrs. Bunting creates her own system of knowledge and assumes for herself a position of power that stands in direct contrast to the official channels of knowledge and power that Lowndes shows to be misguided and ineffectual, and this is particularly apparent in the inquest scenes. The courtroom itself is explicitly described as a male space, and it is indeed uncomfortable for the few women in the room. Lowndes writes, "the women were few; the great majority of those standing there were men—men who were also representative of every class of Londoner" (137). Even class is not enough to preclude participation in the spectacle of the inquest—only women are essentially barred. Most of the women in attendance are there as witnesses, and they, like Mrs. Bunting, appear to appreciate their unusual access to participate in an official inquest. Lowndes writes, "Each woman witness looked eager, excited, and animated; well pleased to be the centre of attention and attraction to the general public" (138). For these women, this is their chance to claim a public voice in the Avenger case. It does not, however, turn out as they might have hoped. One woman, cross-examined by a Jury member about whether or not the suspect she saw was wearing a coat, cries out, "I never said so! . . . I was made to say all those things by the young man what came to me from the *Evening Sun*" (143). Her credibility, not to mention the credibility of that newspaper, is irreparably damaged. Furthermore, we are told, "this interruption, this—accusation, had utterly upset the witness. She began contradicting herself hopelessly" (144). Another woman is made to acknowledge that the foggy conditions on the night in question might have obscured her view, again discrediting her testimony. A third "had nothing to say throwing any light on the investigation, save that she admitted reluctantly that 'Anny' would have been such a nice, respectable young woman if it hadn't been for the drink" (145). Each woman's statement is essentially debunked, save for the third witness, who is forced to publicly impugn the reputation of her dead friend. Women's voices, at the inquest, are highly mediated. In fact, the only piece of testimony that remotely resembles fact comes from a bizarre little man named "Mr. Cannot." He describes the Avenger as looking very much like Mr. Sleuth, which strikes fear into Mrs. Bunting's heart. But his strange mannerisms make him a laughingstock, and the court ignores him. The efficacy of the court is thus brought into question, and the fact that the only person present with any direct knowledge of the case is kept by systemic forces on the outside of the proceedings ensures that justice

will not be done.

<17>At the inquest, we receive our only descriptions of the murdered women. We hear two of their names—Johanna Cobbett and Sophy Hurtle (141)—and are told the location of their bodies, although not their conditions. The morgue where they lie is apparently open to the public, and yet we the readers are not allowed to access them. Only the male jury, it seems, has seen the bodies. Still, this close proximity to the victims—the women, perhaps, who are haunting her—has a striking effect on Mrs. Bunting. We are told, “the full and deadly horror of The Avenger’s acts came over Mrs. Bunting in a great seething flood of sick fear and—and yes, remorse” (141). Although, as we have seen, Mrs. Bunting is no “sister” to her fellow women, in the face of their horrific deaths, and in such close proximity to their very bodies, she is forced to empathize with them. Walking home from the inquest, she has a physical reaction as she thinks of the women, and turns sick and faint. “So sick and faint,” in fact, “that she did what she had never done before in her life—she pushed her way into a public-house, and, putting two pennies down on the counter, asked for, and received, a glass of cold water” (151). Lowndes continues,

Shudderingly, she visualized the two cold bodies lying in the mortuary. She seemed also to see that third body, which, though cold, must yet be warmer than the other two, for at this time yesterday The Avenger’s last victim had been alive, poor soul—alive and, according to a companion of hers whom the papers had already interviewed, particularly merry and bright. (151)

As soon as Mrs. Bunting is in proximity to the victims’ bodies, her own body seems to react in kind: sickening, shuddering as if in sympathy with the cold, dead bodies, and forcing her into a public house for the first time in her life—which, after all, is where the Avenger selects his victims. Her own body, it seems, is intent on reminding her of her bond with other women, forcing her into the same physical space inhabited by the Avenger’s victims. Lowndes thereby challenges the “guilt” of the victims, and forces Mrs. Bunting to question the Avenger’s need to avenge, which earlier in the novel she appeared to understand.

<18>Mrs. Bunting’s sympathy with the murder victims does not last long; after her walk home, she “thought of them no more” (151). However, it does remind us of an important point: Mrs. Bunting may have a bizarre relationship with her lodger, but it is not based in uncomplicated misogyny. We have seen how Mrs. Bunting’s ambivalent relationship with her own gender role has resulted in a strange maternal feeling for Mr. Sleuth, coupled with a disinterest in his victims. But this very ambivalence also allows

her a unique opportunity to turn aspects of her prescribed gender role to her advantage, and grant her a measure of knowledge and power. In fact, Mrs. Bunting's apparent collusion with the Avenger, potentially ideologically dangerous though it is, provides the basis for the construction of an alternative system of knowledge, one that exists outside of (and is continually contrasted with) official channels of investigation and knowledge, like the police and the press. This system of feminine knowledge and power is in the hands of women—indeed, it can *only* exist in the hands of women—who turn their marginal social position to their advantage in the collection and wielding of these subtle forms of knowledge and power. The danger presented by the Avenger is thus representative of the danger of excluding women from social power structures: the danger to women and, as Lowndes demonstrates, to society itself.

<19>As Mrs. Bunting performs the duties associated with her sex, cleaning, cooking, waiting on the lodger, and silently observing her husband's interactions with the newspapers, police, and legal system from which women's participation is either explicitly or implicitly barred, Mrs. Bunting begins to collect bits of information, and becomes a far better detective than the professional male detective, Joe Chandler. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan argue that two types of female detectives appear during this period: "There is the person who succeeds, time and again, because of specialized 'feminine' knowledge which suddenly acquires a new respectability, if only for the duration of the tale; and there is the person who competes with male detectives on equal terms" (12). Although Craig and Cadogan do not mention Lowndes' text specifically, Mrs. Bunting's domestic detective activities clearly place her into the former category, which the authors consider less progressive than the latter. They argue that although "both of these contributed something" to advancing the position of women in society, "it is undeniable that the latter was the more radical and far-reaching" (12). However, Mrs. Bunting's success as a detective goes deeper than simply solving the Avenger case; as the novel progresses, she develops an awareness of her own subjectivity that advances a feminist agenda far more effectively than if she were simply on "equal terms" with Chandler—a man to whom she is clearly superior.

<20>As a domestic worker, Mrs. Bunting takes advantage of her social invisibility to closely observe her lodger's actions. It is "When she was doing the stairs and the landing" (33-34) that Mrs. Bunting first hears Mr. Sleuth's recitation of suspicious Bible verses. She observes his comings and goings, and when he is out she uses the opportunity ostensibly to clean his rooms, but really to conduct a search. After looking everywhere for Mr. Sleuth's mysterious and ominous brown leather bag,

she soon formed a theory as to its whereabouts . . . [It] was almost certainly locked up in the lower part of the drawing-room chiffonier. Mr. Sleuth evidently always carried the key of the little corner cupboard about his person; Mrs. Bunting had also had a good hunt for that key, but, as was the case with the bad, the key had disappeared. (32)

The next time she cleans his rooms, “she looked at the rosewood chiffonier with longing eyes—she even gave that pretty little piece of furniture a slight shake” (45), but to no avail. It is important to note that Mrs. Bunting is not a passive observer—she is an active agent in her own investigation into her lodger’s activities. Indeed, her position is one the official police would appreciate: she has the lodger under her observation at all times, and often has unfettered access to his belongings, finances, and living space. But this investigative boon exists solely because of the domestic responsibilities accorded her by virtue of her sex. Her knowledge is therefore inherently feminine, and thus yields knowledge to which the police, courts, and newspapers have no access.

<21>Mrs. Bunting, who has been described as a clever woman, knows herself to have a curious nature. Even when her curiosity leads her investigation into dangerous circumstances, she follows through on her urge to discover the truth. Slightly later in the novel, Mrs. Bunting again searches the lodger’s room on the pretext of cleaning it. This time, she tips the chiffonier back and forth, trying to discern the contents. Lowndes writes, “A moment later, with sharp dismay, Mr. Sleuth’s landlady realized that the fact that she had moved the chiffonier must become known to her lodger, for a thin trickle of some dark-coloured liquid was oozing out through the bottom of the little cupboard door” (73). She is horrified and suspicious of the thick, red liquid, her fear prompting her to recognize in it a trace of the absent bodies of the Avenger’s victims. Indeed this bodily fluid, this blood, is her only direct encounter with the victims’ bodies. She quickly concocts a story to disguise her investigation, and tells her lodger that in the course of cleaning she has accidentally tipped the chiffonier, and that “a bottle of ink that was inside may have got broken, for just a few drops oozed out, sir” (75).⁽⁶⁾ Though upset, Mr. Sleuth appears to accept her story. Mrs. Bunting castigates herself, “it was owing to her inquisitiveness, her restless wish to know things she would be none the better, none the happier, for knowing, that this accident had taken place” (74). Her curiosity may occasionally get the better of her, but her swift recovery demonstrates her investigative excellence. At the same time, she realizes that as an outsider to official channels of justice, the knowledge she obtains during her investigation will be of no material benefit to her.

<22>Cleaning is not Mrs. Bunting’s only domestic task. She is also responsible for

cooking and feeding her household and any guests she may entertain, and she uses this task to tease information out of Joe Chandler. After personally discovering the second murder, Joe calls to see Bunting, who is out. She persuades him to stay and wait a while by offering him a cup of tea. As they sit and wait for Bunting, Joe begins to offer up details of the latest case. Mrs. Bunting offers him food, as well, which presumably would prolong their conversation:

“Oh no, I couldn’t eat anything,” he said hastily. “I don’t feel as if I could ever eat anything any more.”

“That’ll only make you ill.” Mrs. Bunting spoke rather crossly, for she was a sensible woman. And to please her he took a bite out of the slice of bread-and-butter she had cut for him. (38)

Over the course of their conversation, Mrs. Bunting gains important information about a description of a suspect that matches up suspiciously well with that of Mr. Sleuth. Perhaps she does not learn as much as she would have hoped, however; when Bunting returns home long after Joe has gone, the couple has their first argument of the novel:

“You don’t mean to say, Ellen, that you can’t even tell me where it happened?” he said indignantly. “I suppose you put Chandler off—that’s what you did! Why, whatever did he come here for, excepting to tell us all about it?”

“He came to have something to eat and drink,” snapped out Mrs. Bunting. “That’s what the poor lad came for, if you wants to know. He could hardly speak of it at all—he felt so bad.” (39)

One detects a note of frustration in her shortness with her husband; perhaps this is the frustration of a skilled investigator boxed into a constraining social role. In any case, it is important to note that Mrs. Bunting does not pursue specific information from Joe, she attempts merely to ascertain whether or not the police share the knowledge that she holds.

<23>Mrs. Bunting, then, attempts to keep tabs on the official channels of knowledge while she goes about her own investigation. In one particularly illustrative scene, she physically appropriates a tool of those official channels of knowledge and uses it for her own, decidedly feminine ends. After Mr. Sleuth has spent the night making his mysterious “experiments” in her kitchen, she decides to investigate the source of the burning-wool smell she has noticed all night. Lowndes writes,

Making a “spill” out of a twist of newspaper—she had been taught the art as a girl by one of her old mistresses—she stooped and flung open the oven-door of her gas-stove. Yes, it was as she suspected; a fierce heat had been generated there since she had last used the oven, and through to the stone floor below had fallen a mass of black, gluey soot. (113-114)

Instead of reading the newspaper for information, Mrs. Bunting turns it into an investigative tool of her own, in a way that was handed down to her by an older generation of women. She deploys this explicitly feminine tool within her own domestic space, her kitchen, to learn still more about her lodger’s actions. And of course, the evidence she uncovers, traces of burned women’s clothing, is far more factual than anything that might appear in a newspaper.

<24>The final element of Mrs. Bunting’s feminine system of knowledge is perhaps the simplest: the messages passed on to her by her own body. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Bunting accesses a form of embodied information about her lodger. As we have seen, Lowndes employs a metaphor of illness to describe her relationship with the lodger, and Mrs. Bunting’s physical reactions always speak the truth. The first time Joe speaks of a suspect carrying a bag similar to one owned by Mr. Sleuth, for example, Mrs. Bunting says nothing, but “There had come across her—just right in her middle, like—such a strange sensation, a curious kind of tremor, or fluttering” (38). Her body appears to recognize the connection between the anonymous suspect and her lodger, even before she is consciously firm in her suspicions. Slightly later, when she discovers the red “ink” dripping out of Mr. Sleuth’s cupboard, we are told that “Mrs. Bunting grew chalky white, then recovered herself quickly. In fact the colour rushed into her face, and she grew hot all over” (73). It is as if her body is quickly able to recognize the import of her discovery, even if her mind is slower to grasp it.

Mrs. Bunting is not, however, the only woman in the text who appears to have access to this feminine, embodied form of knowledge. Two other characters who appear only briefly confirm that Mrs. Bunting is not alone in her participation in this alternative realm. First, the most accurate description of Mr. Sleuth as a suspect in the Avenger murders comes from the unlikely source of a barmaid, who meets the man in the course of her duties. No other descriptions come close to “picturing Mr. Sleuth with such awful accuracy” (183), and yet the police don’t appear to follow up on her description, nor does it spark any suspicion in Joe Chandler. Only the barmaid herself and Mrs. Bunting seem to know the importance of the description. And second, aside from Bunting’s late suspicions of Mr. Sleuth, the only character who recognizes the danger posed by the lodger is, strangely enough, Bunting’s dead first wife. When Bunting comes across his

lodger late one night walking on the street, “A stuffless voice—the voice of his first wife, the long-dead girl to whom his mind so seldom reverted nowadays—uttered into his ear the words, ‘Take care!’” (163). Significantly, it is a woman’s voice warning Bunting; only women have access to information about the true nature of Mr. Sleuth.

<25>By highlighting the embodied nature of Mrs. Bunting’s knowledge and by rooting her intelligence-gathering activities in feminine domestic tasks, Lowndes insists on the inherently feminine nature of Mrs. Bunting’s power. Her association between women and domestic space, of course, is not unique to *The Lodger*. As Vanessa D. Dickerson describes in her introduction to *Keeping the Victorian House*, “The Victorian woman more than any other female before or after her was in the house, of the house, the very house itself” (xviii-xix). Moreover, the relegation of women to domestic spaces simultaneously functioned to limit women’s “access to exterior expanses, and to abstract and thereby dismiss her powers in realms where men expressed themselves and wielded material-based power” (Dickerson xv). The close association between women and domestic space applied to virtually all women throughout the Victorian era, as did their resultant exclusion from predominantly masculine institutions of power. Thus Lowndes’ own feminist beliefs shine through in her fiction; her depiction of domestic activities as potential avenues for knowledge and power comprises an extraordinary cultural reversal, in which the tools of oppression become the tools of emancipation—at least for one woman, Mrs. Bunting.(7)

<26>By collecting information about Mr. Sleuth through the creation of a system of feminine knowledge, Mrs. Bunting assumes a measure of power over her lodger. It is within her power to turn him in at any time, and although she never takes such an action, the fact that the possibility exists imbues her with secret power over his life. While this power is certainly never depicted in a wholly positive light—it nearly destroys Mrs. Bunting’s physical and mental health—this is the first Ripper narrative that might allow female readers to assume imaginative power over and control of the Ripper. This figure of terror was so real to women that one 1888 newspaper reports an instance of a female reader dying of terror just reading about the case (Walkowitz 218). He was so real to men that hundreds immediately adopted his persona and began to attack women physically on the streets, and figuratively in print.(8) As Walkowitz reports, the Ripper narrative allowed for the expression of a potent vein of misogynist violence in Victorian London:

In pubs across London, drunks bragged of their exploits as Jack the Ripper. Some Ripper impersonators harassed prostitutes and tried to extort money from them . . . [T]here was also a domestic reenactment of the Ripper

drama between husbands and wives in various working-class districts. (I have no evidence of middle-class cases.) (219)

Walkowitz concludes that the Ripper case “established a common vocabulary and iconography for the forms of male violence that permeated the whole society” (220). By assuming imaginative control over the Ripper/Avenger in her novel, Lowndes stages a protest against the problem of male violence more generally, and allows her readers to experience a form of power-by-proxy despite their perhaps under-privileged social positions. Finally, with *The Lodger*, we have a Ripper narrative in which common, average women are not victims—or at least, they are not solely victims—but are competent wielders of power and active collectors of information. The mode of representation has shifted, and women now assume a central position in the narrative. Whatever the inherent ideological risks Lowndes assumes in her complex and multi-layered novel, this is a significant and ground-breaking change in the cultural evolution of the larger Ripper narrative.

Endnotes

(1)As Donald Rumbelow has shown, Dr. Forbes Winslow was the first to articulate the Ripper-as-lodger theory (see Rumbelow 156-161).^(^)

(2) It has also been adapted for film several times; the first is *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1926. Most recent is David Ondaatje’s 2009 film *The Lodger*.^(^)

(3)A “Joseph Chandler” was the first police officer on the scene at Annie Chapman’s murder (Shelden 29).^(^)

(4)Lowndes wrote several other novels based on high-profile criminal cases, including *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture*, *The Chink in the Armour* (based on the Gould murder at Monte Carlo), *What Really Happened* (based on the Florence Bravo case), and *Letty Lynton* (based on the Madeleine Smith case of 1857).^(^)

(5)The association of Mr. Sleuth with the Bible is another of Lowndes’ markers of the dangers of patriarchal authority.^(^)

(6)This association of the victims’ blood with ink is an extratextual reference to the “Dear Boss” letter of September 25, 1888, ostensibly from “Jack the Ripper.” The text reads in part, “I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last

job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha. ha" (original punctuation and underlining; document reproduced in facsimile at Casebook.org).^(^)

(7) This reversal was precisely the strategy employed by Victorian domestic feminists from the 1830s on, and demonstrates the influence of Lowndes' own involvement with feminist political activism.^(^)

(8) See, for example, Evans and Skinner's anthology *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell* which is comprised of hundreds of letters from men claiming to be Jack the Ripper, and detailing the horrific crimes they wish or plan to commit against women. While many of these letters are undoubtedly the fantasies of twisted minds, the central figure of Jack the Ripper acts as a catalyst that allows for the expression of a strikingly misogynist and violent cultural attitude towards women.^(^)

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