Sensations of Celebrity: 
*Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience

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**Introduction: Melodrama, Modernity, and the 1830s**

Literary scholarship has recently begun to recognize the intimate relations between melodrama and modernity. Almost negligent critical dismissal of melodrama, a commonplace of literary scholarship of the last two centuries, has been replaced in recent decades by a strong consensus that this most dominant and ubiquitous form of nineteenth-century drama played a significant role in shaping, articulating, and contesting changes in social and political relations, as well as in reshaping popular consciousness on the individual level.

Most recently, melodramatic form has been interrogated for its formative contribution to modernity’s unique modes of perceptual apprehension: sensations of suspense and of continual change, the thrill—and the threat—of shock, and the more complex formations of urban spectatorship and the cinematic gaze have all been productively linked to melodramatic pre-formations. In the recent work of Tom Gunning, Elaine Hadley, Vanessa Schwartz, Ben Singer, and other scholars, melodrama, as much as the *feuilleton* or the detective story, has emerged as an exemplary literary mode of Benjaminian modernity.

However, a closer look at much of this work reveals two very different, and in fact discontinuous, constructions of melodrama. On the one hand, a strong body of recent scholarship has explored early melodrama’s relationship to what might be described as political modernity. Focusing primarily upon the century’s opening three decades, such work investigates the manner in which melodramaarticulates the anxieties and emergent class relations of the post-revolutionary world. Derived largely from Peter Brooks’s foundational study of the “melodramatic imagination,” such scholarship conceives of modernity in terms of the historical relation—articulated in the decades after 1789—between radical institutional upheavals (such as
the revolutionary unseating of church and monarchy) and a new form of collective consciousness, both political and epistemological. Popular drama is approached as a contested field of collective political engagement, in which the theater’s new, popular audiences challenged and found almost prophylactic relief from the unsettling dislocations, and increasing disciplinary regulation, of industrial society.¹

On the other hand, a smaller number of recent scholars have linked melodrama to modernity through its precedent relation to film, tracing into sensational melodrama—as far back as 1850—the first expressions of what Singer has recently (if rather clinically) termed a “neurological conception of modernity.” Within this critical framework, derived from the social theories of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Siegfried Kracauer, late-Victorian melodrama is shown to reflect a “fundamentally different register of subjective experience, characterized by the physical and perceptual shocks of the modern urban environment” (Singer, “Modernity” 72).² Modernity, it is assumed here, describes primarily a relation between technological change and individual consciousness, and the drama is approached in these terms as one among the many industrialized media through which one can examine the formation of the modern mass subject. Rather than foregrounding issues of class politics or topical concerns, then, such critics tend to focus on melodrama’s relation to what Jonathan Crary has referred to as “perceptual modalities” (Suspensions 3) or what Martin Meisel earlier described as changing “modes of apprehension” (248).

The relation between these “modernities” is more than a mere difference in heuristic frameworks; it describes as well, and with some precision, a radical, fairly rapid historical shift. Between the second and fourth decades of the century, in the major metropolitan centers of London and Paris, the practice of everyday life, and not the lived memory of revolutionary change, begins to define modernity.

Explanations for this shift are not difficult to locate. In part, it marks a generational change: by the 1830s, the disruption of the Napoleonic era was still recalled by many, but the epistemological shocks of the first French Revolution had, as living memory, faded and decomposed. Even by the 1820s, the international press—born with the upheavals of the French Revolution—had begun to tick off a political history of merely serial variation. The expansion of the press itself reinforced a growing sense of the continuity and the daily incrementalism of historical change, binding even heroic action to the passage
and tenor of the everyday. Revolution became revolutions; politics, as Karl Marx recognized, could no longer be tragic.

In the thirties, the teeming daily activity of the metropolis, rather than political revolution, moves to the foreground as the condition and defining context of modern life. At the same moment, crime stories sweep into the public imagination with remarkable swiftness, all over Europe. Social dislocation, in the wake of nearly a half century of continual war, has become ubiquitous among all classes. Cities cease quite suddenly to appear as great stages of collective action, unless in sentimental form, and begin instead—in Dickens and Poe, for example—to appear as labyrinths of crowded solitude and threatening anonymity. The cognitive experience of apprehensival flux and uncertain temporality which the century’s various modernities share begins to be embedded not in revolutionary historical change but in the uncertain texture of momentary experience. In the city especially, the epistemological crises of revolution yield to the daily shocks of modern life. There is, in short, an evident, surprisingly rapid shift from political to perceptual modernity.

That shift remains poorly articulated in literary history, not least because the same brief period is distinguished by an exceptionally rapid and complicated set of changes in print technology, literary media, reading practices, and audience composition. Generic shifts intensify and proliferate; high and low cultural forms become increasingly imbricated in an emergent mass press; novel forms of media entertainment—like the print culture of George Cruikshank’s work—impinge upon the practice of reading and alter the cultural position of literature.

On one hand, literary scholarship has plucked from such complex situations early examples of much later modernisms. Charles Baudelaire, Georg Büchner, Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, and Edgar Allan Poe, for example, have been read almost as vatic texts, articulating with startling anticipation the modernities of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Romanticism, situated on the thither side of this crucial decade, pulls from the 1830s a few colossal figures, like Victor Hugo, Thomas Carlyle, and Honoré de Balzac, who look out over the romantic past like sentinels and embodiments of revolutionary memory: they are heroic, sentimental, but their monumentality is marked as well by a definite, if defiant, anachronism. The consequent picture is that of a Janus-faced decade—from the late 1820s to 1840 or
W. H. Ainsworth and Cruikshank’s *Jack Sheppard* (1839) occupies a scarcely recognized position of great significance within this development. It registers a powerful moment of reconfiguration in what Pierre Bourdieu terms the “field of cultural production” (115), for Ainsworth and Cruikshank here work out, with a comprehension well beyond Dickens’s early collaborations with Cruikshank, the complicated formal, institutional, and aesthetic problems posed by the period’s rapid changes in media, audience, and politics. However, the book’s larger significance is, I think, more profound, for *Jack Sheppard* also functioned, I would argue, as an exceptional mechanism of the period’s rapid shift in collective consciousness—driving, and not simply describing or reflecting, the crucial shift from political to perceptual modernity. The following pages explore that mechanism.

I. “An Evil Book”

On 5 May 1840, a London valet, B. F. Courvoisier, murdered his employer, Lord William Russell, aged seventy-two. On the face of it, the crime seemed simple enough, for London’s class divisions had been deep and unusually hostile for several years. This murder, however, caused an exceptional outburst of public distress and anxiety, for Courvoisier—though known to be unstable—seemed to have no substantive motive or conscious inclination to commit such a bloody crime. Even more distressing for contemporaries was one significant, highly publicized detail of the crime: Courvoisier claimed, in his second of several confessions, that the idea “had come to him upon reading *Jack Sheppard*” (Hollingsworth 145).

From the very start of its serial publication in the summer of 1839, *Jack Sheppard* had enjoyed extraordinary, seemingly inexplicable popularity; by autumn, Ainsworth and Cruikshank’s fictionalized tale of the famous criminal’s life was outselling even Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837–38), marking a new height in England’s growing appetite for crime stories. Within just weeks of its first installments, in Bentley’s *Miscellany*, the novel had given rise to a full-blown mania, generating a great wave of pamphlets and abridgements, plays and street shows, prints and cartoons, and related baubles and souvenirs. William Makepeace Thackeray, describing London at the height of the fad that
December, noted that in some theaters one could even buy “Shepherd \[sic\] bags—a bag containing a few pick-locks that is, a screw driver, and iron lever” (qtd. in Hollingsworth 140).

Press responses to the mania were negative and even fearful, many clearly mystified by its strength and pervasiveness. Initial literary reviews were exceptionally violent: the Athenaeum, taking the lead, issued a lengthy indictment of both the book and the “bad public” that had developed an unseemly appetite for such fare (qtd. in Hollingsworth 142). Yet critical vitriol seems to have had no governing effect on the craze, which intensified as theatrical adaptations brought the narrative to a much larger audience. By the spring of 1840, “Nix My Dolly, Pals, Fake Away,” the flash song introduced in J. B. Buckstone’s hugely successful adaptation, “deafened us in the streets,” according to one contemporary observer. The tune was “whistled by every dirty guttersnipe; and chanted in drawing rooms by fair lips, little knowing the meaning of the words they sang” (qtd. in Hollingsworth 139–40). Jack Sheppard was everywhere. Yet the intensity of the mania was only part of the problem, as this cartoon in The Penny Satirist of 15 December 1839 (fig. 1) suggests.

In a glance, the pervasiveness of the Sheppard craze is evident—the moonlit city street is dominated by a barrage of playbills—and so too is its particular demographic. While Sheppard’s popularity spanned a broad working-class audience, his most numerous and fanatic devotees were, as one would expect, the young, “masterless” men who constituted much of the city’s growing industrial labor force. Yet the accompanying text is even more explicit, and suggests something of the problem as it was perceived by contemporaries:

FORTH JUV.—Ar; shouldn’t I like to be among ‘em in real arrest. Wot jovial lives they seem to lead! and wot’s the odds, so long as you ar’ happy? Only see how such coves are handled down to posterity, I thinks it’s call’d, by means of books, and plays, and pictures!

FIFTH JUV.—Blow’d if I shouldn’t just like to be another Jack Sheppard—it only wants a little pluck to begin with. —ALL FIVE.—That’s all.

The wave of “books, plays, and pictures” seemed to produce not mere enthusiasm or admiration for Sheppard, but a specific, defining impulse among the city’s most dislocated, volatile population to “be another Jack Sheppard,” to mime his actions “in real arrest” and, in a distinctly modern sense, take on his identity as the model of one’s own.
The sensational force of Courvoisier’s crime lay precisely in its striking confirmation of this disturbing effect. Acting on what seemed to be uncontrollable impulses, the valet had carried out perhaps the first “copycat” murder. The Examiner noted on 28 June that the valet’s laconic confession of the act, just hours after the crime, included a near quotation from Ainsworth’s text, and the Morning Chronicle “reported Courvoisier as saying he wished he had never seen the book about Jack Sheppard” (Hollingsworth 146). Rather than committing his own
crime, Courvoisier seemed to have instantiated, without volition, an idea that “had come to him” upon looking over a briefly lent book.

If the novel’s initial popularity earned for Ainsworth critical disfavor, the Courvoisier murder made him a pariah. The press now stated explicitly what had only been implied in earlier reviews: the book was “calculated to familiarize the mind with cruelties,” it was a “cut-throat’s manual,” a “midnight assassin’s vade-mecum” (qtd. in Hollingsworth 147). Not merely a “bad book” for a “bad public,” then, but a mechanism of murder.

The British government acted immediately to stop the growth of the Sheppard phenomenon: although already-licensed stage adaptations of Jack Sheppard were allowed to continue, permission for any further productions was refused (147; for a subsequent history of Jack Sheppard in the theater, see Stephens). By the fall of 1840, the craze had begun to lessen, though less by suppression than because its novelty had worn to ubiquity. There would be no comparable cultural mania, no such evident, multiform saturation of the popular consciousness by a single book, for more than half a century, until George Du Maurier’s Trilby (1895) prompted a comparably pervasive rage.

II. Genre, Press, and Politics

In order to understand the forces that drove the Jack Sheppard mania, it is helpful to know first what was not new about Ainsworth’s creation. As Hollingsworth explains, Ainsworth drew his hero from history and from a still vital, well-developed popular myth. The real Sheppard, a daring housebreaker, had been executed in 1724 at the age of twenty-one, before a massive crowd of 30,000 spectators. An apprentice turned petty thief, Sheppard had gained almost immediate criminal celebrity not for his heists but for his prison breaks. His last, an escape from the very depths of Newgate, was an astonishing feat of sustained ingenuity, instrumental skill, and gymnastic capability. Sheppard had squeezed his wrists from their irons, twisted and snapped the fetters from his legs, scraped loose the bricks covering his cell’s barred flue, worked loose the iron bar blocking ascent, and climbed up the narrow chimney passage to the prison’s “Red Room,” a cell long reserved for aristocratic prisoners and long empty. Once there, he broke—with the help of the heavy flue bar—the massive lock of its ironbound door, gaining entrance to the prison chapel just off the prison’s rooftop court. After several more
hours of grueling effort, he broke through the seemingly impenetrable exterior door of the prison, climbed the courtyard’s sheer wall to the highest leads of Newgate, and vaulted off over the rooftops of the City. Sheppard was recaptured shortly thereafter, but this, the third, most sustained and challenging of his prison breaks, earned even the admiration of Newgate’s astonished warden.

The young man became an immediate sensation in the press. Before execution he was visited in prison by William Hogarth and James Thornhill, who produced well-known portraits of him, and by John Gay, who may have had him in mind when writing *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728). Narratives of Sheppard’s exploits and life were extraordinarily popular at the time of his death, and remained in popular consciousness long after. Hogarth played upon such familiarity by using Sheppard as the obvious model for the idle apprentice of his most popular moral progress, *Industry and Idleness* (1747). Even in the 1770s, Sheppard remained perhaps the best-known figure in *The Newgate Calendar* (Hollingsworth 132–34).

Ainsworth’s appropriation of these precedents is substantial and complex. Most obviously, he borrows Hogarth’s strategy of setting Sheppard’s life within a double-plotted moral progress, altering the criminal’s story so as to accommodate a second, wholly fictional hero, Thames Darrell. Darrell partially recapitulates the character and function of the industrious apprentice of Hogarth’s progress. Where Jack is knowing, scheming, lying, lustful, covetous, audacious, violent, dissolute, and finally destroyed, Thames is innocent, forthright, truthful, chaste, generous, restrained, gentlemanly, virtuous, and finally married. Yet Ainsworth’s treatment, here as in his other books, offered as its distinguishing feature a careful attempt at historical verisimilitude and biographical accuracy. The novel’s political, social, and architectural topography, even its criminal dialect, are recognizably those of the early-eighteenth century. Details of Sheppard’s career and the people populating it are similarly faithful.

Ainsworth could be assured of the appeal of such a work. Since the early part of the decade, reform in criminal law, and marked disruption of traditional structures of working-class community, had created a large, enthusiastic audience for tales of heroic criminals. Even in the late twenties, the historical figures of *The Newgate Calendar* had gained a renewed popularity, and the Newgate or “Old Bailey” novel, often based upon such figures and events, had become, by 1835, a well-established
and often explicitly political sub-genre—if a largely disreputable one. In the second half of the decade, large-scale dislocation of the poorest members of this class (by the New Poor Law of 1834) heightened social and political tensions, and the Newgate novel, evolving from adventure tales into a more substantive literature of social critique, found a broader popular audience. By 1839, as the consecutive successes of *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard* suggest, the form had become a primary platform for the articulation of recent social experiences of poverty, solitude, and loss of family. Sheppard’s combined appeals, as dislocated apprentice, petty thief, and, ultimately, defiant escape artist, were admirably suited to such a context.

However, for all its calculated appeal, Ainsworth’s novel is not a domesticated fable of criminality. That distinction belongs to *Oliver Twist*, which had celebrated Oliver’s traditional virtue rather than his criminal associations and which appealed explicitly (as Hadley has shown) to liberal, bourgeois opposition to the New Poor Law. Dickens had been chastised for offering his impressionable audience an ill-considered instruction in pickpocketing, but his novel was recognizably on the side of the law. Following just upon *Oliver*’s heels, *Jack Sheppard* offered sharply graphic descriptions of brutal violence, assault, house-breaking, and whoring, all while celebrating a rogue hero noteworthy for his lack of criminal remorse.

In the summer of 1839, the working-class population had reason to be angered, and the *Jack Sheppard* mania offered a wonderful set of gestures and signs, attitudes and postures through which a servant, a beggar, or a petty laborer could make that anger evident. To the established organs of public order, and particularly those who recalled the not-so-distant and similarly disenfranchised mobs of Chartism and the Revolution, the Sheppard phenomenon appeared in that sense as a half-worn mask of insurrection—a theatrical pose, but one accompanied by a look in the eye that says one is not acting entirely in jest. For Hollingsworth, it is this radical political stance that constitutes the primary distinction of Ainsworth’s novel, and which explains, for the most part, its enthusiastic reception.

Yet such a political reading doesn’t quite fit the peculiarities of the mania, for, as we have seen, what distressed contemporaries about Courvoisier’s winter crime was not merely that it transgressed the unstable border between imitation and act, between “playing” Jack Sheppard and becoming a real, politicized version of him. It was,
rather, the fact that Courvoisier’s imitation of Sheppard was not a deliberate “act” at all: the suspect claimed no larger cause or reason for his actions, attached no symbolic value, social justification, or even conscious motive to his oddly mimetic violence. He had merely looked at a book, and the crime came upon him. Rather than providing a motive, Ainsworth’s book seems to have prompted, in Courvoisier as in its many enthusiasts, a kind of impulsive, unreflective mimicry, as if its solicitations were functioning not at the political level at all, but at the levels of sensation and of apprehension. And to understand such a mass audience effect—to recognize the perceptual quality of the Sheppard mania and not simply its political bases—we must look more closely at the complex strategies of representation through which Ainsworth’s tale reached its audience.

III. Recognizing Pictures

Courvoisier spoke not of having read Ainsworth’s novel but of having “seen” the book, and in this he seems to have been typical, for the mania for Jack Sheppard was not only, or arguably even primarily, a literary enthusiasm. As The Penny Satirist’s reference to “books, and plays, and pictures” makes explicit, Ainsworth’s novel was only one element in a much larger, though not incoherent, multimedia production, and the primary mode of that production, from the start, was pictorial illustration. Indeed, as Meisel points out, the phenomenon prompted debate over whether creative priority for Jack Sheppard should be assigned to Ainsworth or to Cruikshank, whose illustrations proved far more popular than the novel itself. “[I]t seems to us that Mr Cruikshank really created the tale,” Thackeray observed, “and that Mr Ainsworth, as it were, only put words to it” (qtd. in Meisel 247–48).

In the late 1830s, Thackeray’s claim could be taken quite seriously. It was in just those years that the economies of scale provided by the new process of stereotyping created something like a mass print audience. While serial novels used the new opportunities to reach a much larger readership, the primary expansion of the print audience—and indeed the creation of an audience for illustrated serial novels—was driven by the sudden availability of, and enthusiasm for, inexpensive images. Print shops, whose audiences had been expanding continually over the preceding century, boomed.

A good deal of this new stereotype production was devoted to
the reproduction and large-scale recirculation of the best-known print images of the preceding century. As Patricia Anderson has shown, such reproductions were often incorporated into the new, inexpensive serials of the burgeoning mass press: Hogarth’s *Industry and Idleness*, for example, first reached a wide, working-class market through its publication in Knight’s *Penny Magazine*, the first great venture of the Victorian penny press. Popular press texts of the eighteenth century, such as the *Newgate Calendar*, also were revived in this decade, as earlier, often contemporary portraits of celebrated popular figures were now inexpensively available in separate form. Indeed, Ainsworth’s choice of
subjects for his first two Newgate novels, *Rookwood* (1834), which related Dick Turpin’s famous ride to York, and *Jack Sheppard*, five years later, were deliberate responses to the particular popularity of these two criminals in London’s burgeoning print culture (P. Anderson 164). By 1839, Sheppard’s image was once again deeply embedded in the minds of Ainsworth’s audience, both in the guise of Hogarth’s fictionalized apprentice and in the swell of reissued contemporary print portraits of Sheppard himself.

As Meisel has described (267–79), Cruikshank makes elaborate use of such widely known images, and particularly of Hogarth’s series, borrowing compositionally and iconographically from *Industry and Idleness*. In a central illustration of the book, “The Portrait” (fig. 2), Cruikshank makes this homage explicit, copying both Hogarth’s well-known life portrait of the condemned criminal and restaging, around that citational figure, the famous sitting itself. However, as Meisel points out, Cruikshank reiterates an earlier and more popular source as well, gaining a rather different effect than the ironic pleasures of Hogarthian citation. In his drawing of Sheppard’s escape from the condemned hold at Newgate, the second of the criminal’s famous breaks (fig. 4), Cruikshank reproduces with near fidelity “the frontispiece of Sheppard’s *Narrative* [fig. 3], purportedly ‘written by himself during his Confinement’” (Meisel 269).9

Gesturing toward a source less widely known than Hogarth’s series, this borrowing gains much of its effect simply from its striking compositional texture: in contrast to the dense, Brueghesque language of Hogarth, in which gesture, objects, and composition articulate a full-bodied, densely rendered moral narrative, this bare, geometric depiction is plain and diagrammatic. Rather than situating its hero in a densely textured iconography, it renders in clear detail the architectural constraints and defining physical action of Sheppard’s escape. While Cruikshank’s reproduction adopts a lower, closer, more intimate vantage (and so gains the opportunity for stronger characterization), it preserves with care the earlier print’s careful depiction of instrumental action.

In so doing, it appeals not only to the renewed popularity of earlier prints, but, more significantly, to a second distinguishing feature of new visual culture in the 1830s: a nearly obsessive fascination, among a greatly expanded audience, with the realistic representation of its own urban experience and milieu. The economics of the penny press had
Fig. 3. Anonymous, “The manner of John Shepherd’s Escape out of the Condemn’d Hole in Newgate.” A Narrative of All the Robberies, Escapes, & c. of John Shepherd. 8th ed. London, 1724.

suddenly offered a much larger palette to contemporary journalists. Profitable pages were to be filled, and writers of the late twenties and thirties turned for material, much like Benjamin’s flaneurial pressmen, to the multitudinous scenes and events of urban life. As Schwartz points out of the later newspaper *faits divers* of France, but in terms that apply accurately to the print revolution of the 1830s, this new journalism did more than bring the everyday onto the page: it fostered, more specifically, the powerfully modern feeling “that the everyday might be transformed into the shocking and sensational,” that “ordinary people” might be “lifted from the anonymity of urban life and into the world of spectacle” (36). If, as George Steiner observed, the French Revolution had “swept ordinary man into the stream of history” (13), the press revolution of the 1830s lent ordinary life—with its very different scale and context of action—the possibility of similar significance. And few acts managed so well to enact this kind of existential transformation as sensational crime, in which the extraordinary emerged horrifically from the fabric of the mundane. Sheppard’s escape scenes, all of which were depicted in similarly clinical graphic form by Cruikshank, were more than historical citation: they gained force from their evident, everyday possibility, appealing in a non-citational way to a broader enthusiasm for authenticity itself (Meisel 249–50).

Such heightened interest in the authentic depiction of sensational reality marks one of the fundamental elements of the decade’s shift from political to perceptual modernity, and it prompted profound changes in the fictional imagination. Meisel points out, for example, that enthusiasm for the “romantic brigand” yielded rapidly in the thirties to a fascination with “the ‘real’ outlaw and his underworld milieu, native, urban, and familiar” (250). By no coincidence, it is at just this time that Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” suddenly imposes himself upon our view, and Büchner’s Woyzeck, too, a character pulled from the newspaper, iconographically almost anonymous. More than merely lifting everyday events into “the world of spectacle,” sensational crime offered the real possibility that anonymity might suddenly become celebrity, that solitude would be replaced by fame, and that everyday life might at any moment become the world of popular fiction.

Part of Meisel’s contribution to our understanding of the *Jack Sheppard* phenomenon, then, is his identification of the book’s complex appeal to contemporary trends in print culture. Cruikshank’s illustrations produced, in addition to the political and narrative appeals of
Ainsworth’s novel, pleasures that were less conscious and more sensational, more calculated to produce effect than to solicit sentiment, and in that quality they bring us a step closer to the compulsory force of the mania as a whole. Yet Meisel, like Jonathan Hill, focuses more intently upon an additional mode of pictorial representation that proves even more significant to the Jack Sheppard craze: the contemporary taste, most marked from 1837–41, for the immediate dramatic realization of the new pictorial novels.

IV. Solicitations of the Tableau

As Hill points out, “ever since the works of Sir Walter Scott had set unprecedented sales for the popular novel, the form had been quarried as never before by dramatists and adaptors in search of dramatic raw material.” With the advent of the illustrated serial novel in the mid-thirties, Hill notes, “dramatists were provided with an additional bonus: visual guides to staging, scenic design, costume, and character appearance” (441–43). More important, they were also provided with the means for a new theatrical effect: the direct realization, on stage and as tableaux vivant, of well-known illustrations from the novels. Like that precedent theatrical mode, dramatic realization hinges upon the pleasurable sensation of pictorial recognition—however, its audience was considerably different. Tableau vivant, a theatrical practice embedded in the painterly court culture of pre-revolutionary Europe, played to small audiences familiar with the high-art objects being delineated. Cruikshank’s images, by contrast, were more widely known even than the popular novels they illustrated, for they were most frequently displayed and sold individually by booksellers and printshops. Moreover, such illustrations gained that broader audience among the lower classes rather than the elite, for such illustrations, unbound, appealed most to those lacking either the ability, the money, or the inclination to obtain and read the novels (Hill 441; see also P. Anderson). Dramatic realization of such images as tableaux allowed a theatrical audience unfamiliar with the book, but possessed of some acquaintance with its illustrations, to assign a narrative to the visual skeleton offered by Cruikshank’s prints. Dramatic realization, however, in its achievement of a familiar illustration in living form, also elicited the complex, sensational pleasures of pictorial recognition. And it is the innovative creation and careful management of these dramatic effects that most marked the novelty of Jack Sheppard.
Although the vogue for dramatic realization developed quickly, it wasn’t until 1837, with Edward Stirling’s dramatization of Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), that we find dramatic realizations of a novel’s illustrations, and those are often imperfect. As Meisel observes, Stirling’s “tendency through much of the play is to use the plates for setting and costume, and to render them as action, with at most some passing point of rough realization” (252). The problem, as is evident to both Meisel and Hill, is that the moments depicted in the novel’s precedent illustration are in many instances unsuited to the static, punctuating aesthetic of tableau and its referential cousin, tableau vivant.

Dickens’s work adapted to this problem rapidly. By 1840 and 1841, with *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens and his collaborators had begun to incorporate the logic of theatrical realization into the novel’s initial presentation, placing illustrations with care at certain moments in the text (rather than printing them as plates)—and suggesting more precisely the dramatic moments of opening, mid-scene, or closing tableaux. However, in these instances Dickens was already imitating the “exemplary climax” of “the pictorial novel dramatized pictorially,” Ainsworth’s collaborative effort with Cruikshank on *Jack Sheppard* (Meisel 265). As we have seen, the choice of Sheppard as the novel’s hero and the close integration of Hogarth’s prints (many of which had already received their own pictorial staging) suggest the collaborators’ adaptation to contemporary trends in print culture and their citational appeal to earlier images. However, as both Meisel and Hill point out, that collaboration is distinguished as well by the fact that the project appears to have been shaped from its outset by a specific desire for effective dramatic realization (Meisel 247–51; Hill 446–47).

Even before the novel’s publication, both collaborators engaged in sustained, unabashed efforts to promote and assist its theatrical adaptation, efforts explicitly linked to the novel’s dramatic logic. However, as Hill has noted, a more radical element of the project’s dramatic realization is Cruikshank’s adoption of an unprecedented pictorial aesthetic for his initial illustrations—an aesthetic, Hill rightly asserts, derived not from Hogarth and print aesthetics but from contemporary dramaturgy. Such derivation is, in some of its more marked characteristics, evident at a glance: the scenes emphasize clear melodramatic gesture, with a clarity of line and a careful finish that stand in striking, immediately recognizable contrast to the more ephemeral, vignette composition of Cruikshank’s Regency work (Hill 429–30). Although the celebrated
illustrator’s hand is still quite legible, these scenes struck contemporary observers as wholly novel in their pictorial qualities. For the first time, Cruikshank composed scenes with the poise and stillness of neoclassical tableau illustration: his typically centripetal energies yield to centrally divided spaces of equipoise and tension, his backgrounds become more sparse and less busy. Perhaps most important, his heroes appear in firm profile, clearly delineated, as is most evident in the central, highly accomplished engraving of “The Audacity of Jack Sheppard” (fig. 5).
Such compositional choices, as even this single image suggests, have implications that extend well beyond pictorial aesthetics. Most immediately, this new pictorial language changes the highly characteristic atmosphere of Cruikshank’s milieux. As J. Hillis Miller points out, Cruikshank typically depicts a world of extreme confinement and almost solipsistic isolation (50); his figures are characteristically caricatures, figures captured in a grotesque moment of uncontrolled, self-revealing emotiveness (51, 57–59). His interior spaces are typically chaotically dense or close and dark (55), lacking even the broad symbolic apertures that characteristically penetrate Hogarth’s interior scenes, and producing, in combination with Cruikshank’s distorted figural style, scenes that are almost nightmare images. If there is a stable perspective within the frame, it is most often that of a figure situated clearly outside the threatening instability and centripetal confinement of such action, a surrogate for the author or illustrator. Cruikshank’s audience, like that of Dickens, is customarily positioned as an onlooker rather than a participant in the scene’s principal action (61–62).

While *Jack Sheppard* situates us in Cruikshank’s characteristically closed, claustrophobic world, the centripetal force that organizes the illustrator’s earlier work is often replaced (as one can see in fig. 5) by strong lines of opposition and outward movement. If these milieux are closed spaces, they are almost invariably broken by a potential exit. In the spare, coldly rational prison frames (see figs. 9–11), those scenes which most distinguish Cruikshank’s work here, Sheppard’s escapes literally enact such visual liberation.

Cruikshank’s new pictorial language invites, as well, a new location of perspective. Unlike the churning, unstable vignettes that characterize his Regency work, these tableaux regularly offer the viewer a stable, balanced, often immobile position within the action of the scene, drawing the viewer’s eye repeatedly to the strongly delineated figure and defiant, composed profile of Sheppard himself. The hero’s typically calm, resolved gaze, the center of control within the narrative’s hostile world, offers Cruikshank’s habitually unsettled, distanced viewer an unexpectedly comfortable position and moment of repose. In a manner that his viewers had never experienced, Cruikshank thus draws his audience into the frame of the action itself.

Cruikshank’s aesthetics produce as well an unaccustomed sense of agency within that scene, for Sheppard’s power within his fictional world—as the prison scenes made evident—is intimately
bound up with his unusual ability to see. Ainsworth and Cruikshank’s Sheppard sees through disguises both sentimental and nefarious; he notes similarities and resemblances that others miss; he sizes up hostile situations in “a rapid glance”; and he excels at nothing so much as locating the improbable avenue of escape (147). Having had our gaze repeatedly drawn to Sheppard’s profile, we are thus encouraged as well to follow his gaze from it: to read Cruikshank’s illustrations well, in this regard, is to see the scene through Sheppard’s eyes.

It is suitable in this regard as well that the book’s most carefully imitative illustration—Cruikshank’s near copy of the scene of the second prison break—is taken from “the frontispiece of Sheppard’s Narrative, purportedly ‘written by himself during his Confinement’” (Meisel 269). The third, final escape series, in which Cruikshank adopts again the strikingly spare, rectilinear perspectives and coldly rational representational stance of Sheppard’s “original,” can be read in this sense as Cruikshank’s extension of his hero’s rationalist perspective over the dramatic milieu itself—a fugitive’s instrumental gaze become absolute, solipsistic. Thackeray cites these illustrations as the most remarkable of the book, noting their isolation and “extreme loneliness” (qtd. in Meisel 268). They are in an important way dream scenes—projections and instantiations of Sheppard’s peculiar way of viewing, and moving through, the world around him. If the audience is invited, in earlier images, to adopt the increasingly isolated hero’s instrumental gaze, these scenes place us within a space—and a dramatic situation—that appear to be constructed by that gaze.

Such apprehensional effects must have played some part in creating the peculiarly imitative quality of the Jack Sheppard mania. More than merely depicting the exploits of a defiant criminal through the visual language of dramatic tableau, the visual language of Cruikshank’s illustrations invited his popular audience, in an unprecedented fashion, to adopt that criminal’s position and perspective: not only to mime his posture and attitude, but to read the world, both inside the book and, by implication, outside it, through his alienated but efficacious gaze.

For both Meisel and Hill, it is precisely Cruikshank’s novel pictorial effects that most strongly support contemporary claims for the illustrator’s “creative priority” (Meisel 248). However, as both critics are concerned with larger trends in pictoriality, neither explores the narrative implications of such effects. For if Cruikshank borrows the language of tableau to compose his illustrations, he also implies, in so
doing, an entire structure of dramatic action and conflict. Unsurprisingly, given the collaborative nature of the project, it is precisely these generic implications that Ainsworth takes up in his fictional reworking of Sheppard’s life.

More subtly, if Ainsworth uses that language to place his audience in Sheppard’s position, he makes evident as well the potential thematic importance, within Sheppard’s world, of distinct modes and ideologies of vision and visuality. And it is through this narrative response to Cruikshank’s pictorial creation—in the translation of this new mode of perception into experience and action—that Ainsworth articulates a sudden evolution in melodramatic form. Moreover, it is also through such narrative translation that the collaborators construct the sensational mechanism of a new, perceptual modernity, and, in the end, it is that peculiar mechanism, more than any political or pictorial solicitations, in which we can locate the particular mimetic forces that prompted Courvoisier’s copycat murder.

V. Hogarth Melodramatized

Once again we must begin by gaining some sense of what was not new about Ainsworth’s narrative innovation, for just as he had appealed to powerful trends in popular fiction and print culture, he appealed as well—and with exaggerated emphasis—to the deeply ingrained conventions of melodrama. Such appeals are most evident in his treatment of Thames Darrell, his updated version of Hogarth’s “industrious” apprentice. Hogarth’s counterpoint figure rises with steady assurance to become Lord Mayor of London, recapitulating traditional apprenticeship narratives that extend back through George Lillo’s “London Merchant” (1731) to the Elizabethans’ many versions of Simon Eyre and Dick Whittington. But Ainsworth’s virtuous apprentice is by contrast a fairly conventional and highly romantic melodramatic hero: Darrell is an aristocratic heir, swept from family and threatened—through the evil schemes of his corrupted uncle—with unjust disinheritance and cruel death. In keeping with melodrama’s already well-established pattern of events, Darrell is a foundling, tragically lost by his murdered father in the midst of a terrible storm and pulled from the river that gives him his name. As a boy, Thames Darrell discovers his rightful identity, and struggles nobly against his persecutors to regain his true place and proper recognition. In the end,
he succeeds to his dukedom in a world again made right: his evil uncle is, quite literally, cast into a dark pit to die.

It is only in the midst of this larger, melodramatic struggle that Thames plays the part of Hogarth’s industrious apprentice, and such subsumption converts the civic trajectory traced in Hogarth’s bourgeois allegory into the sort of temporary social masquerade that marks much earlier London comedies. As in Thomas Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), the city workplace becomes for Thames ironically pastoral, offering the “masked” noble a temporary realm of natural relations and social simplicity, and one in which he finds, as his audience would expect, not fortune but love. Thames’s marriage to Winnifred, the daughter of his master carpenter Wood, replays in sentimental fashion the harmonic joining of nobility and craft in the city, thus melding this small comedy into the larger trajectory of Darrell’s heroic, melodramatic drama.

As is appropriate, Thames seems never to act as anything other than the notable he turns out to be. His generosity of character, personal dignity, bearing and appearance all signify to those around him an inherent nobility. Although he is not at first aware of his aristocratic status, his body and character bear its truth quite legibly. And—in keeping with melodramatic convention—it is just such physiognomic “legibility” that establishes his true identity: Thames’s uncanny resemblance to a portrait miniature of his lost father first makes evident his aristocratic lineage, and it is an intimate sketch of his visage by the young Winnifred that serves as Darrell’s noble token of return to the Wood household to claim his bride. Winnie’s sketch and the portrait miniature of his father are tokens of Darrell’s heroic identity in part because they are all but inimitable—the sketch because of its unique hand and the intricate portrait miniature, “set in brilliants” (89), as a result of its spectacular value. Such singularity endows Thames’s tokens of identity with the aural value that assures their truth, and, in the absence of the lost father, they secure his proper recognition and rights. Rather than tracing the developmental course of the bildungsroman, Thames’s life is all about securing, through recognition, an identity that he carries in his face from the start.

Ainsworth’s rigorous adoption of this early melodramatic template makes the Thames Darrell subplot a powerful articulation of the genre’s often conservative social ideology; in fact, Thames is a character carefully drawn to invoke an earlier generation’s anxieties, fantasies, and modes of truth. As if to make such anachronism
unmistakable, Ainsworth makes Darrell not merely noble but a Jacobite as well, aligning his hero with England’s pre-revolutionary, Catholic monarchy and thereby linking his legitimacy to pre-Reformation structures of divine authority. As the political conditions of Sheppard’s historical context make literal restoration of this divine sort a narrative impossibility, Darrell’s first public assumption of noble status takes place in France, still conveniently pre-revolutionary, where he is made an officer of the king. Upon his return to England, and for his restoration of family and seat, he thus appears (see fig. 5) as a slightly anachronistic figure, dressed in ancien régime pomp, a French aristocrat among the plain folk. Indeed, Wood’s only comic address to his erstwhile industrious apprentice is to remark—at the moment of Thames’s dramatic reunion with Winnifred—upon the doubtful taste of Darrell’s elaborate wig. If his implied critique had not been evident earlier, Ainsworth here tips his hand deliberately, asking his audience to recognize the Darrell plot’s exaggerated imitation of first-generation melodrama—and to sense, as well, the outmoded anachronism of his noble hero.

It is against this carefully conventional, noticeably rickety template that Ainsworth sets his second heroic plot. Here he is of course more constrained by fact—and motivated, too, by the imperatives of verisimilitude: Sheppard’s celebrated escapes, at least, cannot be reshaped by the exigencies of narrative form. Moreover, Ainsworth’s Sheppard remains recognizable as Hogarth’s idle apprentice. Rather than a comic hiatus, Jack’s servitude is real, and his eventual fate unfolds in fairly strict accord with that of his eighteenth-century model: like the idle apprentice, he betrays his master’s trust, takes up a life of crime, and ends upon the Tyburn gallows. However, rather than suggesting Ainsworth’s adoption of Hogarth as a fictional structure, these parallels serve instead to remind us of Hogarth’s own use of Sheppard as an inspiration for his cautionary moral progress: the idle apprentice, after all, was himself a version of the historical Sheppard.

Nonetheless, Ainsworth’s reworking of his hero is substantial and indicates quite clearly the manner in which he adapts his hero’s narrative to the complex symmetric, even chiastic structure of relations borrowed from Hogarth’s dual progress and reinforced in Cruikshank’s tableau aesthetic. First, Sheppard becomes a remarkably melodramatic figure: like Darrell, he is made a symbolic foundling, a second lost babe carried successfully across the Thames in the same boat from which Darrell’s father falls. Also like Darrell, Sheppard is pursued by the
narrative’s melodramatic villains in a larger movement (though this one the arc of his criminal life) that encloses the secondary story of his apprenticeship. Jack turns out even to possess a claim to aristocratic status, for his mother, we eventually discover, is Trenchard’s sister (and Darrell’s natural aunt). Though she dropped into obscurity with her ill-considered marriage to a poor young carpenter—an apprentice to Wood—her nobility, like that of Thames, seems legible to all who encounter her. Unfortunately for both mother and child, Jack, like Thames, is the spitting image not of his mother but of his father, a common carpenter who had been arrested and executed for stealing from his master. And the same physiognomic determinism that secures Darrell’s rights functions here to doom Jack. His likeness to his father, Mrs. Sheppard laments, “is the chief cause of my misery” (4), for it suggests all too clearly her son’s inherited criminality, as well as making apparent the impossibility that Jack might, one day, lay claim to being of her family. The Wood household, which would seem to offer the redemptive opportunity to regain his “lost” inheritance as an honest workman, becomes instead a community from which Jack is alienated. Like Hogarth’s idle apprentice, his struggles leave him in the end isolated, bereft of family, and executed—the very antithesis of Thames Darrell.

Set against the Darrell plot in this way, Ainsworth’s reworking of Hogarth’s “idleness” narrative appears less a cautionary tale than a failed melodrama, the narrative of a hero placed in similar circumstance, and faced by identical challenges, but lacking the appearance, demeanor, and tokens of proper recognition—the very keys to agency in a dramatic genre then obsessed with the recovery of lost identity. Perhaps most significantly, the two plots are not merely made parallel; they are carefully intertwined. Their actions double and cross each other, drawing our attention, as if in a series of object lessons (the high-point of each captured in Cruikshank’s tableaux), to the problem that melodrama’s logic of identity poses from the very outset of the narrative for Ainsworth’s criminal hero.

Ainsworth introduces conflict between the apprentices, for example, in two closely linked scenes: first, when he has Jack jealously snatch Winnie’s intimate sketch from a smitten Thames, and, immediately after, when Jack returns to the shop with a stolen portrait miniature (the portrait miniature, of course), struggles over it with honest Thames, and then accuses Darrell of the theft in the climactic scene in
Sir Rowland Trenchard’s library. These two moments, the highlights of the book’s apprenticeship cycle, not only introduce the primary auratic tokens of Darrell’s recognition; they also dramatize Sheppard’s own jealous lack of any such tokens—and of the means, consequently, to realize his familial identity. Within the frame of melodrama’s visual economy, he is anonymous, and to be anonymous is to be lost.

Yet it is in just these scenes that Ainsworth and Cruikshank begin to put the visual economy of earlier melodramatic convention into play with the new modes and modalities of visual culture, for the collaborators repeatedly, and systematically, set the sensational “recognition” effect of tableau realization itself in careful counterpoint to the auratic, and arguably obsolete, mode of pictorial recognition that establishes Darrell’s identity. And in so doing, the authors obtain a peculiar dual effect: if the book’s illustrations employ the pictorial and sensational logic of realization to induce their audience to adopt Sheppard’s own perspective, to see the world through his eyes, they do so at precisely those narrative moments when melodrama’s conventional modes of apprehension and recognition are most strongly asserted against him.

VI. Escaping Melodrama

This sort of modal conjunction is emphatic in “The Vindictiveness of Jack Sheppard” (fig. 6), the book’s first tableau announcement of an oppositional relation between the two heroes. Jack and Thames are both captured in vignette, in the midst of action and with an emotive uncertainty that reinforces the narrative sense of their as-yet-unformed characters. Nonetheless, the lines of their conflict and its stakes are delineated with clear melodramatic polarity: the struggle is between protectiveness and violence, restraint and aggressive confrontation. As will be the case throughout the narrative, Jack is placed in opposition to other characters, typically paired to a tool or weapon, his isolated figure confronting and disrupting the scene’s composition of familial or social order. Strewn in the foreground are the tokens of what is at stake: the sketch and the portrait miniature, those privileged icons of Thames’s place in household and society. As tableau, the scene depicts eloquently Jack’s poverty in the play’s visual economy. However, as illustration, and as dramatic realization, the tableau becomes a moment of pictorial recognition, invoking the competing visual economy of the new mass press.
How these two systems of pictorial identity are related begins to emerge in the ensuing tableau of the two boys—the confrontational scene at Sir Rowland Trenchard’s house in which Jack falsely accuses Thames of the miniature’s theft (fig. 7). Here Thames is situated just along the margin of the broad, opposing field of aristocratic visage and portraiture that dominates the rear wall, a visual expression of the hazy and corrupt hereditary power that Trenchard represents—and a background against which the virtuous Thames now appears with less graphic or moral clarity, standing in openmouthed astonishment.

Hauled before Trenchard just prior to Jack’s arrival, Thames has been recognized by his treacherous uncle—as the foregrounded presence of the miniature in Jonathan Wild’s hand reminds us. While such recognition re-establishes Darrell’s noble identity, it has also earned the unsuspecting boy a death sentence. Melodrama’s tools of recognition seem here a fatal trap.

 Appropriately, it is in this scene that Jack first publicly declares his own identity, and in a manner that makes plain—particularly in
Buckstone’s condensed dramatic adaptation—his challenge to the pictorial system that governs Trenchard’s realm and Darrell’s fate:

*Jack Sheppard is brought on in the custody of Abraham Mendez.*

_The servants look in at the door._

**WILD Mendez!**

**MENDEZ** Yesh, sar.

**WILD** Get your ruffles ready. (_To Jack_) Well, sir, what’s your name?

**JACK** (_staring about him, and looking at the pictures_) Jack Sheppard. (_Pointing to a picture of the Earl of Mar, against the wall_) Who’s that queer cove in the full-bottomed wig?

**WILD** Attend to me, sirrah!—do you know this picture? (_Pointing to the miniature on table_)

**JACK** I do. (Buckstone 37)

Sheppard’s self-declaration, accompanied by a wry reference to the portrait of the Earl of Mar, a leading Scottish Jacobite, is set in evident conflict with the auratic, patriarchal logic of “the pictures.” However, Cruikshank’s illustration solicits at the same time a complex, alternative system, and community, of recognition. Sheppard stands out in sharp profile against a bright, uncluttered background, joined in his oppositional field by the crowd of curious servants peeking in at the door, with a pose and visage that dominate the entire composition. Within the narrative, Jack literally makes a name for himself at this moment: to the onlooking audience in the rear doorway, his easy, balanced defiance of Trenchard and Wild causes evident shock—and in Ainsworth’s reworking of history this scene marks the beginning, in the gossip among servants, of the boy’s criminal celebrity.

To this narrative moment of recognition Cruikshank adds another. This profile, which he henceforth repeats with relentless determination, first appears here as the unerring portrait of Sheppard’s character and heroism. In contrast to the ephemeral vignette of the first tableau, Cruikshank here delineates with uncharacteristic firmness the strong features of his criminal hero—a profile iconographically simple (and thus easily found in any print-shop post-up) and obviously symbolic. Just as Thames’s elaborate French wig has just announced his almost anachronistic nobility, Jack’s close-cropped, “bullet-shaped” (54) head signifies his rejection of such pretension and suggests as well his contrasting contemporaneity. Cruikshank’s audience, like the servants in the door, is given its first identifying view of the new criminal hero.
And Cruikshank goes further, linking that pictorial sensation of recognition to a powerful visual and narrative solicitation of identification with his hero. Unlike Thames, Sheppard is poised, commanding in his melodramatic posture the space and situation around him. To the shock of everyone present, he has just falsely accused Thames of the miniature’s theft—not to avoid arrest, but to force the arrest and confinement of Thames as well. Once in the Clerkenwell Roundhouse, Jack surmises, escape will be easy, and the impending murder of his naive friend thus averted. Unlike Thames, Jack has—as Ainsworth’s narrative makes explicit—“cast a rapid glance around him” and “instantly divined” the situation (137); he sees clearly, in the few silent seconds upon entering, both the threat posed by the scene and the most effective way for Thames, and himself, to escape. Jack’s visage, then, is not merely a recognizable icon. His gaze also controls the scene, registering the power of Sheppard’s visual capabilities, and the powerlessness of Thames’s innocent virtue, over the outmoded melodramatic world in which they are seemingly trapped. Within the narrative and without, Cruikshank and Ainsworth offer that perspective as a clear challenge to the conventional modes of visual and moral recognition that so strongly marked early heroic melodrama, reinforcing its narrative occurrence in each instance with the sensational effect and apprehensional modality of dramatic realization.

It is within this sequential structure of pictorial and dramatic counterpoint—a structure that serves, I think, as the deliberate underpinning of Ainsworth’s “romance”—that the third such tableau, “The Audacity of Jack Sheppard,” gains its full resonance. Certainly, as Hill points out, the visual rhetoric of this central engraving is emphatic, setting Sheppard and Darrell in an almost neoclassically composed confrontation. In terms of its pictorial aesthetic, the image is closer in spirit—and politics—to Jacques-Louis David than to Constantin Guys, Baudelaire’s “painter of modern life” (1). The figures are drawn in clear profile and momentous pose, their gazes locked across an unobstructed field that suggests monumental relief. Darrell and Sheppard assume heroic stature, and their confrontation takes on commensurate weight, setting Jack’s cool criminal modernity against the agitated aristocratic outrage of his foppish counterpart.

Yet there is more going on here, for this moment—that of Jack’s audacious return to a family he has robbed and betrayed—follows immediately upon the epic return of Darrell himself, and the narrative care-
fully sets these two scenes of reunion in exaggerated symmetry. Thames’s precedent entrance—again offering the template of convention—follows well-established patterns of epic recognition. Like Odysseus returning to Ithaca, and like, too, the foundling Figaro discovering his parentage, Darrell returns as a hero closing his own cycle of action, recovering a clear identity in order that he might claim his proper place in household and world. And like those precedent figures, he has gained re-admittance through the presentation of his privileged tokens of identity, those intimate markers of physiognomic resemblance legible only to those already familiar with and to him. Unlike Cruikshank’s first Sheppard-Darrell tableau (see fig. 6), then, which is concerned with the characters’ competing efforts to gain identity within the household, or his second (see fig. 7), which marks their respective recognition within a hostile world, this third tableau (see fig. 5) captures their competing declarations of heroic return and familial reunion.

It is as such—as an attempt to claim such recognition in the Wood household—that Jack’s entrance is specifically an act of “Audacity.” Not only has he gained entry without suitable tokens of recognizance (indeed, he has done so through his “false” assumption of fine clothes), but he is at this moment held responsible—albeit wrongly—for the death of Mrs. Wood, whose portrait is noticeably absent in the empty space just above his head. In a tableau that is legible as a contest for familiar recognition, it is evident that Jack is responsible for a familial loss—a loss signified emphatically by the absence of both the person and the image of Mrs. Wood.

Yet, if Jack cannot claim reunion with the narrative’s familial community, his effort to do so is accompanied, in careful coincidence, by Cruikshank’s single most emphatic solicitation of pictorial recognition—for the audience is now confronted with the defiant figure of the mature criminal hero, carrying in his pocket the broadsheet reward notice that marks his identity with the notorious historic figure on whom he is modeled. In a specific sense, Sheppard too claims recognition and reunion in this tableau, but the “family” to which he appeals is that of his recognizing public. And the efficacy of such claims is signaled quite clearly, for this moment of audacity is accompanied by two noteworthy reactions: that of the maid, recoiling in terrified, sudden recognizance of the personage who stands before her, and that of Thames Darrell himself, who now—in a neat reversal of “Vindictiveness”—reaches for his
sword in a gestural recapitulation of Jack’s own helpless, boyish efforts to contest his rival’s status.

If the narrative here suggests Jack’s asseveration from melodramatic community, everything about the scene’s pictorial and dramatic logic signifies instead his ascendancy within a new culture of pictorial apprehension and identity. More than offering their audience a new sort of hero, Cruikshank and Ainsworth here assert a new way of viewing and organizing the world—one radically opposed to the formal, pictorial, and political epistemology of conventional melodrama. It is with the implications of that novel perspective—both visual and social—that I will now be concerned.

VII. Recognizing the Mass Audience

Both within the narrative and without, the recognition that Jack Sheppard solicits and attains distances itself emphatically from melodrama’s conventionally privileged space of familial relations. Instead, it invokes the ambiguous familiarity of celebrity, a mode of social identity enabled by the advent of the mass press and recognized within what Benedict Anderson—discussing the advent of the newspaper—has described as an imagined community of readers and viewers. As Anderson points out, the constitution of such community takes place largely “in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull,” for the sensation of pictorial and narrative recognition enabled by dramatic realization, like that of reading the newspaper, is an essentially private one, with each participant “well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (25). Celebrity functions dialectically in this community, offering a surrogate form of familiar recognition even as it reaffirms in practice the anonymity and isolation of its authorizing community. Unlike melodrama’s earlier model of familial relation, in which (as Denis Diderot attempted to show) all members are intimately related, the imagined community of Jack Sheppard enthusiasts is a community of individuals whose relations to each other are mediated, on a mass scale, through the celebrity figure of Sheppard himself.

That such relations are oppositional to familial identity is made evident throughout the novel, and Sheppard’s own status within familial community is consistently eroded and denied over the course
of his rise to fame. However, it is in dramatic adaptation, in which the constitution of that viewing audience becomes physical, that this antithetical relation became most emphatic. In J. B. Buckstone’s adaptation for the Adelphi Theater, for example, the exigencies of dramatic compression become an additional means of enforcing such antitheses. Most evidently, Buckstone excises from his stage narrative Sheppard’s complex relations to his mother, removing the several scenes in which the hero returns, remorseful but unrepentant, to his increasingly


impoverished, eventually mad parent. Rather than staging a realization of Jack’s tortured visit to his mother in Bedlam—the single illustration that most strenuously evokes emotions of maternal love—Buckstone merely has his villains refer to her situation in passing during a scene in which Sheppard is hidden in the background. Yet, crucially, the playwright has the obscured hero emerge momentarily, so that he “is seen to clasp his hands in agony” (49), recapitulating the very posture that Cruikshank assigns him in the Bedlam scene (fig. 8).

In so doing, Buckstone offers perhaps the most subtle, intimately recognizable moment of pictorial recognition to his audience even as he excises the harrowing familial tableau from which it is derived. By retaining and even heightening the pleasurable sensation of pictorial recognition even as he removes the competing, painful realization of Mrs. Sheppard’s madness, Buckstone subtly reinforces the claims of the imagined community over those of the family. Suitably, Jack’s reaction, too, is thus rendered as a private, isolated moment of introspective emotion, “legible” only to those who recognize its derivation from the book and binding Sheppard’s private perspective more closely to that of his knowing audience.

Buckstone’s reorganization of the realization sequence of Sheppard’s final and greatest escape (figs. 9–11) performs a similar operation. Rather than presenting the elaborate sequence in a single scene (which would require a multiple box set too large for the Adelphi stage), the playwright splits the escape into two scenes, and he situates between these—as a simultaneous action—the brief episode in which Darrell proposes to, and is accepted by, Winnifred Wood. By this point in the play, as the “Audacity” tableau has suggested, Sheppard’s identity within the imagined community of recognizing viewers has already been set against that of Darrell within the Wood household, and his extreme isolation in these scenes is set in precise contrast to Darrell’s exaggerated familial reunion. To an audience absorbed in the spectacular excitement of the Newgate escape, Darrell’s betrothal to Winnie is thus set up as a momentary intrusion of conventional domesticity, reinforcing more than contesting the audience’s immersion in Sheppard’s narrative and rendering all the more urgent the final escape scene’s perspectival solicitations of identification. It is a structure that asks us not only to see contrast but to take sides, and Buckstone’s imposed betrothal might well have elicited hoots of impatient dismissal, appearing now as a cloying interruption in the suspenseful struggles of the now perfectly isolated hero, whose solitary gaze controls, and even constructs, the carceral space of his own action. In contrast to his previous escapes, Sheppard’s most epic break from Newgate is unimpeded by either accomplices or human opposition, and unmotivated, as well, by any imperative outside Jack’s own liberation.

The “extreme loneliness” that Thackeray identified as the most striking quality of these scenes here takes on additional significance, for it is precisely that quality which now enables the exclusive union of
Sheppard’s perspective—now projected onto the environment itself—with that of his sole onlookers, the audience. At the moment of his greatest instrumental agency, both Sheppard and his viewers are relieved of all competing claims of social attachment and obligation and endowed with an isolated gaze that commands its surroundings. The iron bar itself becomes for Sheppard his only “faithful friend” (Buckstone 77), the sole attachment enabling freedom in a now wholly depopulated urban landscape. Pictorially as well as dramatically, the climactic Newgate escape binds liberation to alienation and links the sensation of community to the accomplishment of social isolation.

**Conclusion: Celebrity and Solitude**

As a combined pictorial, narrative, and theatrical phenomenon, then, Ainsworth and Cruikshank’s fictionalized *Jack Sheppard* offered a critique and even a repudiation of the model of community and the associated modes of perception articulated in conventional melodrama. It asserted instead a mode of identity now more accurately suited to the lived experience of its audience—that of the alienated spectator, isolated in practice and perspective, but bonded imaginatively to all fellow enthusiasts. While such imagined community reinforced rather than alleviated the dislocated social isolation of its members, the phenomenon of *Jack Sheppard*, in all of its maniacal force, implied the rejection of an entire system of authority through the adoption of a radically different way of seeing the world and redrawing it within one’s mind. In the context of early industrialism’s wrenching, explicit reorganization and imposition of social identity, the idea of “becoming Jack Sheppard” offered not only an alternative to identities imposed from above and recognized in anachronistic or unavailable structures of community, but an alternative that found its imprimatur in the isolation of spectator and celebrity, and in the assumption of Sheppard’s own, alienated gaze. When Courvoisier coolly informed police that he “drew the knife” across the throat of his master, it seems possible that, at some level, he was making a fair bid to reshape and declare his identity within this new visual culture of the mass print audience—and by any reasonable estimate, he succeeded.

Yet Cruikshank adds a final wrinkle to his narrative, one that lends the play additional significance. If we look back, not at the several stark, isolating scenes of prison escape, but at the domestic spaces of
Jack Sheppard, it becomes evident that they trace their own emergent space of confinement. Not a carceral space in the literal sense, but a space in which identity itself becomes increasingly contained, and confined, by print culture. Mrs. Sheppard’s poor Marshalsea room is adorned most markedly with scribbled graffiti and a grotesque, scatological sketch of a king, both intrusive marks of earlier residents, of individual passage through, and habitation of, the ragged space. The opening scene of Cruikshank’s apprenticeship series (not pictured), which situates us in the working space of Wood’s house, copies and intensifies Hogarth’s own allegorical inclusion of prints. If Ainsworth’s characterization of Darrell is self-consciously outdated, this reworking of Hogarth is, by contrast, self-consciously modern, refiguring the shop as one of Sheppard’s adulthood rather than his youth, marked already by the popularization of Newgate criminals such as himself. By the time we are shown the apprentice’s private spaces, in the loft above (see fig. 6), the novel’s characters inhabit a media culture much closer to that of 1839 than of 1747, their walls papered almost entirely by popular print images. And the determinism suggested by these walls is striking, for the images massed on each side of the tableau delineate, with almost absurd emphasis, the precise character of their consumers. In a manner no less artificial than Hogarth’s, but reflecting a sociological condition of far greater print saturation, Cruikshank suggests an almost existential imprisonment within the mediated perceptual world of mass-produced images.

It is wholly fitting in this regard that Buckstone’s adaptation of Sheppard’s final escape ends with his tragic recognition not by an acquaintance or relation, but by a penny press hawker. The boy is standing just outside the door of Jack’s boyhood home, the fugitive’s last refuge, crying out “advance” copies of “the last dying speech and confession—birth, parentage, education—character, and behavior of the notorious housebreaker, Jack Sheppard!” (79). Momentarily struck agast, in a moment of peripety that echoes Oedipus rather than Figaro, Sheppard bludgeons the boy to the ground with his heavy iron bar, but he cannot prevent recognition. “There he is! I know him! Jack Sheppard!” cries the boy, and the escape is over (80). In a neat reversal, Sheppard is ultimately trapped within a prison constructed of the print mania for his own image, recognized and claimed, just steps from the safety of the cellars, by the alienated, imagined community of the penny press. In the end, then, Cruikshank imagines celebrity not as a libera-
tion from anonymity, but as its binding dialectical pair, the sign and engine of a world rapidly confined within the disciplinary apparatus of the mass culture gaze.

Sheppard’s final escape becomes in this sense a nightmarish perceptual passage, and not simply a moment of physical liberation. From the psychomachia of the Newgate scenes, a world generated and governed by his solitary gaze, Sheppard emerges into a world in which his social identity is inescapable, imposed by the gaze of all who recognize in him the figure of his criminal celebrity. The mechanism of that recognition, associated throughout the play with the popular audience, with class resistance and radical political opposition, is here unveiled as a mechanism of surveillance, a nightmarish extension of the gaze of the law.

And it is, finally, in this nightmarish unveiling of a changed world that Jack Sheppard most powerfully articulates a transformation of consciousness, from that epistemological community of political modernity to the sensational community of perceptual modernity. Sheppard’s audience, severed by the displacements of preceding decades from the community identities that informed earlier, political action and change, appears here in its modern mass form: a collection of isolated individuals, their performance of community mediated rather than direct, articulated not in collective action but through shared moments of apprehension, sensation, and recognition. That shift, driven perhaps most powerfully by the decade’s sudden explosion of cheap print, undoubtedly informs Marx’s cool observation that the tragic revolution of 1789 could now appear only as farce. Yet, as Georg Lukács observed, in the mediated milieu of perceptual modernity, the conflicts that form identity do not disappear altogether; they are instead moved within, to the realm of personality and of individual consciousness (149–51). Such alienation is powerfully registered in Büchner’s near-contemporary Woyzeck (1837), in subsequent shifts to psychological melodrama, and, I think, in the discontinuities of form, audience, and cultural position of the novel during these decades. Undoubtedly, it informs the shift from the characteristically epistolary novel of the eighteenth century, which (like early melodrama) invoked a community of sympathy, to the quintessentially journalistic novel of Dickens’s mass public, which, like the penny press, appealed instead to a community of spectators, its types and characters seemingly legible amid the anonymous crowd. However, none of these developments in literary history carry the particular force of the Jack Sheppard mania, that
hybrid “book” which served as a primary mechanism, and not simply a literary articulation, of the modernity it describes.

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NOTES

1 In addition to Brooks, see, for example, Booth, English Melodrama, “Melodrama and the Working Class,” and “Soldiers of the Queen”; Clark; Cox; Duffy; Fietz; Gaines; Gerould; Hadley; Hyslop; Ilsemann; McConachie, Melodramatic Formations and “Pixere-court’s Early Melodramas and the Political Inducements of Neoplatonism”; and Mulien.

2 Work of this orientation includes Bratton, “The Contending Discourses of Melodrama”; Brewster and Jacobs, Theatre to Cinema; Charney and Schwartz; Gunning; Howarth; McWilliam; Schwartz; Singer, Melodrama and Modernity. Also of note, though it does not focus specifically upon melodrama, is Crary’s work on the formation of visual modernity, Techniques of the Observer and Suspensions of Perception.

3 Hollingsworth’s detailed look at the event (145–48) far exceeds my discussion here; as will become evident, however, I am taking a slightly different tack through the rich material he gathers.

4 Patricia Anderson (159–66) gives a good description of the variety and abundance of these many versions, in some form or another, of Jack Sheppard’s career.

5 Hollingsworth’s study offers the definitive history of the genre; however, Meisel offers a better sense of the complex, multiform evolution of the Newgate novel within the emerging social and media context of the 1830s (see especially 47–82). Stephens offers some information on legal contexts for the phenomenon’s theatrical manifestations. The best treatment of the political context in which Jack Sheppard appeared, though it does not devote significant attention to this work, is Hadley’s “Storming the ‘Bastile’: Oliver Twist and the New Poor Law,” in her Melodramatic Tactics.

6 As Meisel notes, “For the alarmed, if the Jack Sheppard craze was not directly Chartist or republican, it responded to the same social distempers that generated those radical movements” (265).

7 Hadley demonstrates persuasively the critical importance of social dislocations brought on by the New Poor Law, which eliminated the city’s traditionally parochial institutions of poor relief and instituted instead the Victorian system of the workhouse. In addition to severing poor relief from local neighborhood systems of recognition and community, the new laws systematically destroyed poor families, separating their members by age and gender and incarcerating them, as solitary moral subjects, in disciplinary workhouses.

8 This question of priority serves as the starting point for Meisel’s discussion of Jack Sheppard in Realizations, his magisterial study of the evolution of theatrical realization and pictorial aesthetics in nineteenth-century theater.

9 From Sheppard’s Narrative. As Meisel notes, the Narrative is sometimes attributed to Defoe. He notes as well that “Ainsworth quotes phrases from this document” (269n39).
19Patricia Anderson dates this sudden proliferation of decoration from about 1832, when “inexpensive printed imagery of all kinds and from several sources became widely affordable and available” (173).

WORKS CITED


———. “Pixerecourt’s Early Melodramas and the Political Inducements of Neoplatonism.” Redmond 87–103.


