

Popular Novel to Popular Stage: The Case of *Jack Sheppard* (1839), with Some Dickensian Comparisons

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1) We shall, perhaps, be accused of dilating too much upon the character of the Highwayman, and we plead guilty to the charge. But we found it impossible to avoid running a little into extremes. Our earliest associations are connected with sunny scenes in Cheshire, said to have been haunted by Turpin; and with one very dear to us—from whose lips, now, alas! silent, we have listened to many stories of his exploits—he was a sort of hero. We have had a singular delight in recounting his feats and hairbreadth escapes; and if the reader derives only half as much pleasure from the perusal of his adventures as we have had in narrating them, our satisfaction will be complete. Perhaps, we may have placed him in too favorable a point of view—and yet we know not. (*Rookwood*, chp. 48)

2) Mr. Ainsworth has made Turpin his own. After the ride he has given us in company with that renowned hero, we will implicitly believe anything he may please to write about him—and be very grateful for it into the bargain. (*Sketches by Boz*, “A Visit to Newgate”)

3) Few younger sons, we believe, can boast so much [as Tom King]; and it is chiefly on their account, with some remote view to the benefit of the unemployed youth of all professions, that we have enlarged so much upon Tom King’s history. The road, we must beg to repeat, is still open; the chances are greater than they ever were; we fully believe it is *their* only road to preferment, and we are sadly in want of highwaymen! (*Rookwood*, chp. 31)

4) Take a small boy, charity, factory, carpenter’s apprentice, or otherwise, as occasion may serve – stew him well down in vice – garnish largely with oaths and flash songs – boil him in a cauldron of crime and improbabilities. Season equally with good and bad qualities – infuse petty larceny, affection, benevolence and burglary, honour and housebreaking, amiability and arson – boil all gently. Stew down a mad mother – a gang of robbers – several pistols – a bloody knife. Serve up with a couple of murders – and season with a hanging-match.

N.B. Alter the ingredients to a beadle and a workhouse – the scenes may be the same, but the whole flavour of vice will be lost, and the boy will turn out a perfect pattern – strongly recommended for weak stomachs. (*Punch*, 7 August 1841)

5) The tragic truths which lie hid in what I may call the Philosophy of Circumstance strike through our philanthropy upon our imagination. We see masses of our fellow-creatures the victims of circumstances over which they had no control,—contaminated in infancy by the example of parents, their intelligence either extinguished or turned against them, according as the conscience is stifled in ignorance or perverted to apologies for vice. A child who is cradled in ignominy, whose

schoolmaster is the felon, whose academy is the House of Correction,—who breathes an atmosphere in which virtue is poisoned, to which religion does not pierce,—becomes less a responsible and reasoning human being than a wild beast which we suffer to range in the wilderness, till it prowls near our homes, and we kill it in self-defence.

In this respect the Novel of “Paul Clifford” is a loud cry to society to amend the circumstance,—to redeem the victim. It is an appeal from Humanity to Law. (1848 Preface to *Paul Clifford*)

6) **Jack** In a box of the stone jug I was born,
Of a hempen widow the kid forlorn.

Blueskin Fake away!

Jack And my noble father, as I’ve heard say,
Was a famous merchant of capers gay,

Blueskin Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

Chorus Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

*I was born in a cell in Newgate prison
The child of a hanged man’s widow.
Carry on (stealing)!*

*Was a notorious dancing master
Don’t worry friends, carry on.*

Jack The knucks in quod did my schoolmen play,
And put me up to the time o’ day.

Blueskin Fake away!

Jack No dummy hunter had forks so fly,
No knuckler so deftly could fake a cly.

Blueskin Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

Chorus Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

*The imprisoned thieves were my teachers
And they taught me their tricks.*

*No pickpocket had such clever hands,
No pickpocket could steal so skilfully.*

Jack But my nuttiest lady one fine day,
To the beaks did her gentleman betray.

Blueskin Fake away!

Jack And thus I was bowl’d out at last,
And into the jug for a lag was cast.

Blueskin Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

Chorus Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

*But one day my favourite mistress
Betrayed me to the magistrates.*

*And thus I was arrested at last,
And was thrown into prison as a felon.*

Jack But I slipped my darbies one morn in May,
And gave to the dubsman a holiday.

Blueskin Fake away!

Jack And here I am, pals, merry and free,
A regular rollicking Romany.

Blueskin Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

Chorus Nix my dolly pals, fake away.

*But one morning I got out of my fetters,
And gave the jailor a holiday.*

A real carefree Gypsy.

7) Nix My Dolly travelled everywhere, and made the patter of thieves and burglars 'familiar in our mouths as household words'. It deafened us in the streets, where it was as popular with the organ-grinders and German bands as [Arthur] Sullivan's brightest melodies ever were in later day. ... it was whistled by every dirty guttersnipe, and chanted in drawing-rooms by fair lips, little knowing the meaning of the words they sang. (Theodore Martin quoted in S. M. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth and His Friends*, 1911)

8) Should it e'er be my lot to ride backwards— some day
At the Crown, in St. Giles, I'll most certainly stay;
I'll summon the landlord, I'll call for a bowl,
And drink a deep draught to the health of my soul.
 Whatever may hap,
 I'll taste of the tap,
To keep up my spirits when brought to the crap;
For nothing the transit to Tyburn beguiles
So well as a draught from the bowl of St. Giles.

*Should I ever be riding backwards to
Tyburn, the place of execution, I'll
certainly call for the traditional bowl
of punch at the Crown Inn,* on the way.*

** A London tradition for condemned
felons.*

Going Further ...

The best study of Ainsworth's early career, including *Jack Sheppard*, is Stephen James Carver, *The Life and Works of the Lancashire Novelist William Harrison Ainsworth 1805-1882* (Edwin Mellen, 2003).

For *Jack Sheppard* in popular culture see Elizabeth Stearns, "A 'darling of the mob': The Antidisciplinarity of the Jack Sheppard Texts," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41 (2013).

For an edited text of Buckstone's *Jack Sheppard* see *Trilby and Other Plays*, ed. George Taylor (Oxford World's Classics, 1996). (Not all the notes are trustworthy.)

For the abridged recording of the Buckstone-Rodwell *Jack Sheppard* see *Jack Sheppard* (Retrospect Opera, 2023). (For this CD recording, with an accompanying booklet, see David Chandler.)