Alexa Van Vliet

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Crime, Violence, and Immorality in Eighteenth-Century London

INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth-century London was a place where status and reputation were crucial aspects of one's life. For the citizens living a privileged, glamorous life, their "fixed" place in society was still partially fluid as one could affect their reputation by means of marriage or the company they keep. However, a large portion of Londoners were either not part of this privilege, or fell from it. Criminals ran rampant, disturbing London to an alarming degree. Whether the work of petty thieves hoping only to secure enough to survive, or that of those willing to murder to fulfill their schemes, crime became a defining aspect of London life all in its own, giving its perpetrators a culture all their own. This culture fascinated people, and one way this fascination was expressed was through books. More than a few authors examined crime in their stories, ranging from small acts of violence thrown in to add excitement to centering their books on the criminal acts committed by the main character. Four such books include *Moll Flanders*, *Jonathan Wild*, *Evelina,* and *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. These books incorporate crime and violence to varying degrees in their stories, and are mostly quite accurate and realistic in their descriptions of such. However, this realism is lacking when it comes to the consequences of these crimes, often giving their main characters a happy ending at the cost of an inaccurate portrayal of crime. This paper aims to compare the life of real criminals to these fictional accounts, and illustrate the reasons why an author would choose an accurate portrayal in some aspects but change the details in others.

In order to accomplish this aim, this paper will discuss crime from different lenses. Beginning with a focus on gender, I will compare the different worlds of male and female criminals. Next, I will show the setting of this criminal activity with the broader scope of London as a whole, before zooming in on life in Newgate prison. Finally, reasons for criminal actions will be scrutinized as I discuss duels, and their moral impact. By going through the "who," "where," and "why" of crime in eighteenth-century London and their representation in novels, I hope to find why the line between realism and fiction is drawn where it is.

Gender and Crime

London in the eighteenth century was a place where society kept its population in strict social ranks. Based on one's birth, there was typically little movement from the class where one was born, with any exceptions usually occurring through marriage. However, the eighteenth century brought with it many changes to the social landscape, allowing for social exceptions to become increasingly common. With men leaving for the military or to try and make a living overseas in America and an increase in population of the city, the anonymity possible while walking down the city streets was increasing. Several changes resulted, from women who had to learn to provide for themselves with the absence of their husbands, to those taking advantage of the increasing population to get away with criminal activity. These factors resulted in changes of behavior for both genders, despite the desperate societal pressure to maintain the polite manners and typical roles of each.

WOMEN

The changing environment of London had its biggest impact on women. With many men gone overseas or in the military, women were losing husbands, and unmarried women found themselves struggling to marry and find financial support. A commentary on crime and the plight of women at this time, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* follows the title character as she tries to keep a decent life for herself, ends up falling to crime as a means of survival, and ultimately repents for her sinful life. Moll serves as an example of how the women of eighteenth-century London may find themselves becoming criminals; with men going overseas or joining the military, and rough sea-voyages taking the lives of many, the gender-imbalance greatly affected a women's opportunity to marry. With the woolen trade on the decline, honest work was hard to find as the few jobs available would go to returning military men, forcing many women to turn to robbery and prostitution to support themselves (Backscheider 464).

Crime and its consequences are mentioned from the beginning, where Moll describes the circumstances of her birth in Newgate prison:

> [M]y mother was convicted of felony for a certain petty theft…however…my mother pleaded her belly, and being found quick with child, she was respited for about seven months, in which time having brought me into the world, and being about again, she was call'd down, as they term it, to her former judgment, but obtain'd the favour of being transported to the plantations…(Defoe 8)

Here, gender plays a major role in the sentencing of criminals. "Pleading the belly," or claiming pregnancy, was a way women could buy time before their sentencing if they were found to be pregnant. This was advantageous as it could mean a reduced sentence, in this case being sent to the plantations in America (Bree 289 n. 8).

Moll begins her life hoping to live by honest means, but complications prevent her from staying on this path. After the death of her first husband, she finds herself in a series of marriages which ostracize her, including one that turns her from a simple widow to a women being technically married but abandoned, one where she unknowingly marries and has a child by her half-brother, and finally one where she has been fooled into a marriage from which she thought she would grow rich but instead found her new husband is poor. After the death and financial downfall of her banker husband, she slowly learns about the shadowy world of crime, and eventually impending poverty drives her to steal for the first time. "This was the bait;" she thinks as she spots the first package, "and the Devil who I said laid the snare, as readily prompted me, as if he had spoke…'twas like a voice spoken to me over my shoulder, take the bundle; be quick, do it this moment…" (Defoe 160). Moll initially feels remorse and fear for her crime, but soon begins to steal again, explaining, "Poverty, as I have said, harden'd my heart, and my own necessities made me regardless of anything" (Defoe 163). Here Moll echoes the concerns of many female criminals, who are driven to deprioritize their morals over providing for themselves and their children.

By becoming criminals, women set themselves outside of societal norms by two counts: first, crime was outside of moral society; and second, the crimes committed by women were effectively feminized in description. "The constellation of basic traits that these women bring to their criminal activities," John Rietz writes, "are very much the traits of traditional womanhood: wit, passivity, beauty" (474). Force is removed from the description of crimes committed by women, being called "thieves" instead of "robbers," and Moll Flanders describes herself as "dexterous" and her thieving skills as "art." It is apparent her talent comes from her wits and

cunning, as they get her out of potentially dangerous situations even when her dexterity fails (Rietz 474).

As shown from these examples, women have quite the place in crime in eighteenth-century London. While perhaps not in a clear category like society would have preferred, women nevertheless made up a good portion of the criminals roaming the London streets. While Moll's final sentencing of deportation was possible, in her case (not being pregnant), the reality of such a sentence would have been less likely; however, Defoe was most likely showing the importance of repenting for one's sins through Moll, and thus had her sentence changed in order to demonstrate her remorse for what she had done, and emphasize the gratitude she felt for being alive and finally able to live an honest life.

MEN

While women turned to crime to deal with unprecedented hardships brought on by the absence of men and husbands, men had their own reasons to turn to crime. As mentioned previously, many men went overseas or became involved in the military. Many died either on the sea or on foreign shores hoping to make a better living in America. For those men who did return from sea, their unruly disposition and distasteful manners learned there did not mesh well with the rest of London society. Already casting these men as outsiders from polite society, it could be said that crime came more naturally to them as they returned to the mainland. These men, strong and used to violence, were not afraid of civilians, and when they found little work was to be had, turned to robberies in these tough times (Backscheider 462).

Another factor leading to an increase of crime was simply a rapid increase in urbanization. Unskilled men and women, coming from a faltering rural economy, were naïve,

lending themselves to become victims of crime and then perpetrators of it (Backscheider 461). While men were leaving London, the hardened sea-veterans which returned were able to take advantage of the population left behind.

An example of this type of criminal can be found in Frances Burney's *Evelina,* in the character of "the Captain." Returning from sea after seven years, Evelina is unable to understand why his return was so looked forward to, and tells Mr. Villars, "I do not like him. He seems to be surly, vulgar, and disagreeable" (Burney Letter XII, location 500, par. 1). Later in the novel, the Captain plays an elaborate "prank" towards an elderly Madame Duval, leaving her tied in a ditch, clothes torn and covered in mud. While not the type of crime associated with returning seamen robbing for a means, the basic impolite behavior is still highlighted here. It is plausible to surmise that the reason for this is to highlight impoliteness as its own sort of crime: as Londoners looked upon politeness as a sign of status, giving the Captain a rude personality would be a way for Burney to suggest that politeness was virtuous, and the behavior of the Captain was unacceptable.

This was not the only way men were involved with crime, however. As will be mentioned later in this paper, violence was for a long time expected of a gentleman in order to defend his honor in the form of duels. Drinking was also greatly problematic in London at this time, cited as a "sin which lead to greater sin" (Rabin 457). Drinking itself was seen as bad enough, but the actions one took while under influence were seen as a slippery slope towards evil. Strangely, however, the novels looked to for this paper in terms of crime mostly mentioned drinking only as a plot device, and rarely as this terrible sin for which it was known in "real" London. This is perhaps due to the authors wishing to have their readers consciously turn away from sinning; if a character's actions could be blamed on alcohol, the conscientiousness of

morality would be lost, and an excuse given to drink themselves. While drinking was not seen as an excuse or pardon of responsibility (Rabin 463), it makes sense that authors did not want to illustrate a character acting out of his control due to intoxication, as it took away a chance to create a sinful character who becomes aware that what he is doing is wrong, but then repents. Whether through rude manners, drunkenness, or dueling, men made up many of the criminals in eighteenth-century London.

Places of Crime

While *who* was committing crime is important to understand, just as important is the type of place *where* the crimes were being committed. London in the eighteenth century was a changing city with a huge influx of people, altering the rules of living even as newcomers struggled to get a handle on proper conduct. While London as a whole was greatly affected, crime had other homes in the city. Newgate prison was a notorious prison housing a large portion of the city's caught criminals, the inner workings of which acted as a small city all its own. Mentioned frequently in literature, the prison was a symbol of crime and falling from grace, and often referred to as "hell" by those imprisoned there. As bad as life in the prison may have been, there was no doubt life in London had become increasingly difficult due to crime as well.

London Under Rampant Crime and Jonathan Wild

Londoners grew increasingly panicked as crime rates soared in the 1700s. The economy was down, which increased motivation to rob and steal, and a heavy population made it easy for criminals to commit their crimes in broad daylight (Backscheider 461). Fearful citizens barred their homes with whatever manner of advanced locks they could afford, but even these could be

rendered useless as some gang members would play the role of servant in order to gain employment and entry into homes (462). As elaborate and as cunning as this ploy was, however, there is arguably no greater scheme than that controlled by Jonathan Wild.

Jonathan Wild can quite literally be called a man of legend: while many factual biographies were written on his life after his death, it was common at this time to embellish stories to fill in unknown details, of which there were many for Wild. While some writings are obviously satire, such as Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild,* the line between fact and fiction on this man are, overall, quite blurred. In both Fielding's retelling and by Gerald Howson's description (which follows), Wild held tyrannical control of crime in London:

> Wild's system involved making money in two different ways. On the one hand, merchandise that was stolen by a thief, or a gang of thieves…particularly in the case of securities and articles of sentimental value…could be returned to its rightful owner for a consideration through the "lost property" office Wild ran out of his house in the Little Old Baily. On the other hand Wild shared in the government rewards of £40 for each thief that he captured, for whom he could provide courtroom evidence resulting in condemnation. By the first sources of income, Wild was in effect a crook; by the last, he was in effect a combination of policeman and district attorney (Richter 107)

Wild's power to control London's criminals seemed only to increase as it fed on itself: as he increased his knowledge of the thieves he employed, he was able to leverage control of even more thieves, as his connections allowed him to easily take out anyone who refused to join his network.

The citizens of London were seemingly better off in Wild's London as opposed to before and after. While crime was widespread in this organized system, its organization by nature was

much easier to deal with. There was a very high chance that a stolen object could be recovered with this setup, and if the criminal was not part of Wild's network, he could easily get them hanged. After Wild's demise, the amount of tried and convicted thieves dropped greatly (108).

In Fielding's work about the combination thief/thief-taker, Wild's "greatness" is emphasized in exaggerating amounts. While Fielding was ultimately using this term ironically, it can be argued that in a way he is also acknowledging the criminals skill; as illegal as it was, Wild's control of London's crime was something ingenious. However, by referencing this man's "greatness" for what would be seen as "bad" or even "evil" acts, Fielding is warning his readers not to fall to such depths, as you will incorrectly convince yourself that you are safe but eventually justice will prevail and you will fall.

Life in Newgate Prison

Londoners in general were much exposed to crime; it was everywhere, and they had to remain vigilant to guard against it happening to them or their homes. For criminals, danger always hung above their heads, and those caught were often sentenced to the infamous Newgate prison. One of 150 prisons in London, the notoriety of Newgate was such that both factual and fictional sources describe it in the same way. Says Maureen Waller in "Crime and Punishment," "Prisoners entering Newgate for the first time might have been forgiven for thinking they had entered hell itself…New prisoners were first struck by the uproar, the raucous noise of hundreds of inmates crowded together with the sounds of fetters scraping across stone floors. Then there was the noxious stink of unwashed bodies mixed with the ubiquitous fog of tobacco smoke in the ill-ventilated surroundings" (Waller 309). Defoe's Moll Flanders has similar thoughts of the place, shocked at "the hellish noise, the roaring, swearing and clamour, the stench and nastiness,

and all the dreadful croud of afflicting things that I saw there; joyn'd together to make the place seem an emblem of Hell itself, and a kind of entrance into it" (Defoe 228).

The livelihood of those brought to Newgate was heavily dependent on their wealth. Beginning from his or her arrival, the prisoner was constantly pressed for money by the jail keepers, who had to buy their position for £5,000 and aimed to recoup the costs, and others working the jail. When first entering the prison, one would have to pay "garnish" or risk his possessions being taken from them and being thrown into a cesspit (Waller 310). Housing was also affected by what one could afford, and amenities such as furniture and a bed with clean sheets all cost even more. Visitors, whores, and cleaning women were available for a price, and it would cost to either have a friend bring in food or to have the chef cook what rations the prison afforded (310). One could live a relatively peaceful sentence there, or be reduced to eating rats and mice until they died and their family could scrape together the money needed to collect the body (311).

Moll Flanders experiences the benefits of having money when she is brought on the ship with other Newgate prisoners. When she pays a Boatswain to send and receive a letter for her, she remarks, "I took care when I gave him the shilling, to let him see that I had a litter better furniture about me, than the ordinary prisoners, for he saw that I had a purse, and in it a pretty deal of money, and I found that the very sight of it, immediately furnish'd me with very different treatment from what I should otherwise have met with in the ship" (Defoe 257). In this way, she is assured of the delivery of her letter and of receiving the replies she is waiting for. Life in Newgate would not be easy, but certain discomforts could be eliminated for the right price. Authors such as Defoe who referenced the prison wanted to emphasize that sin lead to hell, and

one could arrive there even before death. This was one aspect of reality that authors did not feel the need to fictionalize: the real thing was an effective moral warning as it was.

Responsibility for Crime

For the many reasons people had to commit crimes, some were committed not out of desperation to escape poverty, but out of a sense of moral duty. While beginning to decrease in occurrence, duels between men to defend their honor still took place in the eighteenth century. Whereas most crimes were committed by those struggling for survival, the violence involved in duels was seen as a "gentlemanly" thing for those in certain social standings, it was also these men's responsibility to respond and uphold their honor, or that for whom they fought.

Duels

In *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* by Eliza Haywood, Betsy's brother gets involved in a duel to defend her honor and ends up badly injured as a result. Both the brother and the "gentleman-commoner" wished to avoid the violence, but, "Neither of them wanted courage, nor communicated their rendezvous to any one person, in hope of being disappointed without danger of their honour; but each being equally animated with the ambition of humbling the arrogance of the other, both were secret as to the business, and no less punctual as to the time" (Haywood 79).

These violent acts, which began with the use of swords, were originally meant to be a demonstration of skill. Opponents would need to prove themselves to each other; however, imbalances between the sword skills of each opponent are what ultimately caused the greatest amount of injuries, as one would ultimately end up being better than the other in skill

(Shoemaker, "Taming of the Duel" 529). It was all but impossible for men to refuse these duels, as one's honor was on the line (Shoemaker, "Male Honor" 194).

The use of swords was declining as pistols became increasingly common. Mr. Francis, Betsy's brother, and his opponent made use of both weapons. In the novel, both men survive this encounter badly injured; however, in reality should this duel have occurred, they would have either made use of their swords, causing grave and potentially fatal injuries, or have used their pistols; which, ironically, lead to less fatalities than swords (Shoemaker, "Taming of the Duel" 533). Reasons for this decrease in deaths are thought to have been due to the fact that, as the weapons were changing, so were the rules for duels: as demonstrations were less for skill than to show courage, the desire to actually injure one's opponent decreased (Shoemaker, "Taming of the Duel" 529). In *Miss Betsy Thoughtless,* the use of both weapons would be in an attempt to add a dramatic effect to the duel, whereas the survival of both men would have been unlikely. Nevertheless, the fact that both men lived is probably to show the idea that defending one's honor (or in this case, the honor of a family member) was quite important, while the grave injuries serve as a warning of the consequences that happen if one should get themselves into trouble in the first place, as Betsy was so prone to doing.

Conclusion

Throughout these works, authors have made many references to crime and violence in Eighteenth-century London. The plight of women who had no choice but to turn to crime was seen in *Moll Flanders,* while men held bad manners such as in *Evelina.* London under Jonathan Wild's organization was examined, as well as the lives of those who were sent to Newgate prison. Finally, the reasons for crime were discussed, earlier with the mention of drinking and its

implications, and later with duels and why men felt morally obligated to comply. While author's descriptions of many of these acts and consequences are quite close to accurate, the final outcomes of many of these fictional events are just that: fictional. Authors tended to bend the rules in the final acts of their stories in order to prove a point (usually, that being moral was the right thing to do, no matter how many times the character did something wrong), or simply to continue the plot. Authors were careful to balance the fear they evoked by describing crime and violence with the idea that, if you do the right thing, you will be rewarded for it. London in the eighteenth century was a time where morality was a greatly examined part of one's life and social status, and as necessary as it was for some to commit crime as a means of survival, society did its best to encourage the best behavior no matter how trying the circumstances through the use of stories and novels.

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