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Sheppard’s Flock
Lacy Offutt

Yes sir, I am the Sheppard and all the turnkeys of Newgate are my flock. And I cannot but stir from here and they all come baaing after me.

-Jack Sheppard

The daring escapes of Jack Sheppard captured the imaginations of the people of London as it allowed the common man to live vicariously through Sheppard’s deeds. In a time where the newspapers were reporting on an ever-increasing crime rate and parliament was passing stricter and more oppressive laws, Jack Sheppard gave people a sense of escapism in a world in which they otherwise had little control over. His deeds and the sensationalizing of them seized the attention of the Londoners of his time and gave them an anti-hero to cheer for who was able to escape the confines of an ordinary person’s life. His exploits also gave his contemporaries a different view on crime and helped influence the way crime fiction was formed. His brief life affected the way Londoners of two centuries later would romanticize thieves, crime, and criminals.

If we are to understand what it was about Jack Sheppard’s deeds that first so enthralled the people of his time, we must first look at the events that shaped the consciousness of an ordinary Londoner during this time. During the early half of the eighteenth century, after George I came to the throne in 1714, England experienced a flood of legislature aimed at keeping the lower classes in submission and the ruling classes firmly on top. Douglas Hay reasons that this was because of the “freedom not of men, but of men of property” which followed the 1688 Glorious Revolution. It was during this period that the value of property became far
more important to the ruling class than the value of human life.\textsuperscript{1} It was this type of thinking that would see many criminals swing on the Tyburn tree for minor acts of theft -- Sheppard among them. Two of the laws passed, which were aimed at the criminal class, were the Waltham Black Act of 1723 and the Transportation Act of 1719.

Where previously the courts had the choice between hanging or branding a criminal and then releasing them, the Transportation Act gave them the option of sending these lower class men and women away for forced slave labor in the West Indies or the American colonies. The amount of time spent there would be based on what sort of crime they committed. For example, someone pardoned for capital punishment could expect fourteen years of this. With the passing of the Black Act in 1723, England -- and London in particular -- suddenly found itself with more offences that received capital punishment than ever.

The Waltham Black Act, or as it was more commonly called, the Black Act, would be the Act that Jack Sheppard, like many other low-class criminals of the day, would fall victim to. According to Thompson, this Act was said to have, “signaled the onset of the flood-tide of retributive justice.”\textsuperscript{2} This one act completely changed the face of English law of the day. The Act included in its count somewhere between 200-250 crimes that could receive capital punishment.\textsuperscript{3} The exact reason behind the passing of this Act seems murky at best. The only explanation that can be found involves acts of poaching done around the forests and private properties of England by men who would “blacken” their faces in order to conceal their identities. Specifically a group of armed men known as the Waltham

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Douglas Hay, “Property, Authority and the Criminal Law” in \textit{Albion’s Fatal Tree} (Penguin Books: New York, 1977), 18-19.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 23.
\end{itemize}
Blacks would break into these forests, carry off deer, and rescue other offenders from the constables. These offenders, who would humiliate and defy authority and destroy or steal the ever-important property of the wealthy, were naturally seen as a threat against the established order of the world.

Other pieces of legislature passed at the time included the Riot Act of 1715, the Combination Act of 1721, and the Workhouse Act of 1723. The Riot Act was used as a way to disperse crowds of people if they were, “unlawfully, riotously and tumultuously assembled” so that people could not form a protest against the ruling class. In 1780 an anonymous “dilettante in Law and Politics” published a work arguing that the Riot Act was ignoring the Common Law of England and had created “capital crime out of what was not before in any degree, criminal or punishable.” This anonymous voice continues to point out the absurdity in the wording of this Act and how it needed to be remedied by newer amendments in the hopes of “preserving our freedom.”

The Combination Act was the “earliest Act of British history designed to stop the formation of trade unions.” It had been set in place specifically for a group of master tailors who wanted to stop over 15,000 journeyman tailors from being able to unite and request better pay and shorter working hours. Together these Acts seem to paint a picture of a government seeking to control the freedoms of its people, or simply that of a wealthy faction which was completely uncaring towards the needs of the lesser classes. Thompson is writing about the Black Act, but his view that

4 Ibid., 27.
7 Ibid., 28.
8 Linebaugh, 17.
it was “drawn up and enacted by men who had forced habits of mental distance and morality towards human life” can be extended towards these other Acts as well.9

With all of these new laws passed that were aimed at keeping the poor man in his place or which viewed human life as less important than a few stolen spoons, it is no wonder that the people of London welcomed the man who was able to defy this authority and escape the court’s judgment under impossible odds. Jack Sheppard must have seemed like a breath of fresh air to them.

The workhouse was an institution which would have also had an effect on the people of London and on Jack Sheppard himself. At the age of seven or eight Sheppard was sent to Bishopsgates workhouse where he stayed for a year and a half. Afterwards, he was taken in by Mr. Kneebone, a woolen draper, for whom his mother worked and who also employed Sheppard as a shop boy.10 Linebaugh sums up what affect this might have had on young Jack by pointing out that the workhouse was an “institution designed to instill habit of industry and obedience among its incarcerated inmates…produced Jack Sheppard, a master of escape.”11

Once he was old enough, Jack was apprenticed to Mr. Wood, a carpenter, for the next seven years. During his apprenticeship, the Bloody Register calls Jack a, “very sober and orderly boy” of whom Wood and his wife seemed quite fond of.12 In Sheppard’s own words, his descent into crime was from his association with a button-mould maker in Drury Lane who operated an ale-house which brought him into contact with Elizabeth Lyon, better known as “Edgeworth Bess,” a prostitute who Sheppard later

9 Thompson, 197.
11 Linebaugh, 14.
describes as a “wicked, deceitful and lascivious Wretch” and the cause of his troubles.  

Following his association with Bess, Sheppard soon fell off the straight and narrow. His first crimes constituted of petty thievery in order to “satisfy her voracity.” Soon, these two trouble makers got in over their heads; Bess was arrested for the theft of a watch during the summer of 1723 and was locked into St. Giles Roundhouse. Once he had heard of her fate, Sheppard instantly went to rescue her. He got into an argument with the elderly custodian, which culminated with Jack forcibly taking away the key to Bess’s cell and subsequently freeing her. As Sheppard put it, “I have sometimes procur’d her Liberty, and she at others has done her utmost to obtain mine and at other times she has again betray’d me into the hands of Justice.”

Betrayal was a common theme in the life of an eighteenth century lawbreaker, something compounded by the laws of the time encouraging thieves to turn King’s evidence or impeach each other; and it was certainly a theme in Jack’s life. In the month of October 1723, Jack partnered with his brother and pulled two robberies amounting to about fifty-five pounds worth of goods. While trying to fence these stolen items, Jack’s brother, Thomas, impeached Jack in hopes of securing for himself a sentence of transportation. Jack was good at hiding though, and had it not been for the second betrayal by James Sykes, called “Hell-and-Fury” and another associate of Jack’s, who tricked him into a game and called the constables on him, Jack might not have been found.

As it was, Sheppard soon found himself locked in St. Giles

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13 A Narrative of all the robberies, escapes, &c. of John Sheppard: giving an exact description of the manner of his wonderful escape from the Castle in Newgate, and of the Methods he took afterward for his Security (London: John Applebee, 1724), 14.
14 Ibid., 3.
15 Ibid., 11-12.
Roundhouse, the very prison Bess had previously been in. That night, with the help of an old razor, he put a hole in the roof of his second-story prison and escaped amidst a gathering crowd. At this point Sheppard was still nothing more than a petty thief, albeit a rather lucky one. He was still not considered much of worth to the general populace. It was his third escape which truly got everyone’s attention.

On 19 May 1724, Sheppard and Bess were again arrested and this time put in the New Prison of Clerkenwell. It was this escape which would truly begin the legend of Jack Sheppard. He was put in the Newgate Ward of the New Prison, chained into place with a pair of double links and basils which totaled fourteen pounds each. He sawed off his bindings and cut through the iron bar on the window and a nine inch oak bar before lowering Edgworth Bess -- who was called an “Amazon” and a striking contrast to Sheppard’s own small frame -- out of the window and down 25 feet. He then got both himself and her to freedom after managing to escape over a 22 foot wall. According to the Newgate Calendar this deed gave him fame and he was “greatly celebrated among the lower order of people by this exploit; and the thieves of St. Giles courted his company.” For the keepers of the gaol this escape was the most impressive one he ever did as it was “unprecedented in the history of the gaol; for no prisoner had ever before broken out of the condemned Hold in the daytime under the very noses of the turnkeys.”

Soon afterwards, Sheppard returned to his old ways of thievery, this time stealing from his old master, Mr. Kneebone. Kneebone advertised in the papers about his loss to Jonathon Wild, the thief taker, and secretly, a far greater thief and deviant than Sheppard. Wild was able to retake

16 Ibid., 5-6.  
17 *Newgate Calendar* (Derby: Thomas Richards and Son, 1840), 72.  
18 Bleackley, 21.
Sheppard with the help of Bess, and by October of 1724 Jack Sheppard was locked away in the most impregnable room in the Newgate Prison known as the Castle.

By this time Sheppard’s fame had spread and people would flock to the prison to see him. The Old Bailey Trials says that there had never been “any felon in this kingdom, whose Adventures had made so much Noise as Sheppard’s.” According to the Newgate Calendar he was visited by “great numbers of people of all ranks, and scarce any one left him without making him a present in money.” Jack was full of his “jokes and stories of his own pranks, which he related in a Manner, that shew’d he was so far from repenting his Vices, that he only wish’d for an Opportunity of repeating them.” All of London was aware of Jack Sheppard now; the people gossiped about him on the streets, the rich came to gawk at him, and newspapers printed stories and imaginary letters about this remarkable prison-breaker. Little did they know that his most astonishing escape was yet to come.

In the dead of night, Sheppard got himself free from the heavy manacles, unchained himself from the floor, and proceeded to use a broken link of chain to tear out a hole in the chimney where a pipe blocked his only exit. When he was finished he had a hole three feet wide, six feet in length, and enough rubble to fill a cart. Going up the chimney, he found himself in a room unopened for seven years. By use of his “art” Jack won his freedom from this room and then proceeded through the prison unlocking, breaking, or damaging the next five doors to stand in his way to freedom.

Over the next few days until his final recapture, Jack would

19 Select Trials at the Sessions-House in the Old-Bailey (Dublin: S. Powell, 1742), 140.
20 Ibid., 75.
21 Ibid., 138.
encounter many people, all of them talking about his escape. At Charring Cross, while he was laying low in the guise of a beggar, he found the talk around him to be full of nothing but the escape of Jack Sheppard. At an alehouse near Piccadilly he spoke with a woman who wished a curse to fall on whoever betrayed Jack Sheppard. In Haymarket he found two different ballads about his deeds being sung.²²

When he was eventually recaptured and sent to Tyburn the crowds that turned out to watch their hero go past on his final journey had not been so great since the execution of Robert Lockyer seventy-five years before.²³ Even on the way to his death this remarkable young man never gave up the thought of escape. His manner was as cheerful as ever even after his guards had stopped his first escape attempt of the day. He was said to have given his “usual quips and cracks for the benefit of the gaolers” and once on the journey he even laughed.²⁴ Until the very last of his life, Jack Sheppard continued to embody the spirit of freedom and escape, and the people loved him for it.

Watching hangings at Tyburn was a part of the normal life of the people of London and had been for awhile so it is not much of a surprise that a business of sorts sprang up around the spectacle of public hangings. For some time newspapers had been printing collections of work known as, “True Confessions” and “Dying Speeches,” especially by the 1720’s. This literature was focused on the criminals hung at Tyburn and their crimes. The accounts were usually gathered by the Ordinarys of Newgate who were sent to get the doomed prisoners to confess their crimes and repent and would often sell the stories to the newspapers afterwards.

²² A Narrative, 26-27.
²³ Linebaugh, 26.
²⁴ Bleackley, 217.
extraordinary and seemingly impossible deeds as Sheppard would have
been of great interest to the mobs with their thirst for this new type
of entertainment. A man by the name of John Applebee, editor of The
Daily Journal and the Original Weekly Journal, was one of these men who
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deal which allowed him and his reporter’s special access to the condemned
hold of Newgate.25 One of the men who sometimes wrote for him was Daniel
Defoe, the author of Robinson Crusoe.

Defoe found Jack Sheppard as interesting as his contemporaries,
and, during Sheppard’s two stays at Newgate, Defoe would visit and
interview him. Five of the main biographies published about Sheppard
contemporarily have been attributed either wholly or in part to Defoe. It
could be argued that Defoe’s hand in how Sheppard’s biographies were
done helped shape the future of crime literature. Defoe presents his subject
in a more humane light than the previous “accounts” had. He showed
Jack as a human being and a “vivid individual spirit.” Holmes puts it as
Defoe presenting “a greater human depth, greater historic accuracy, and
authenticity” than the accounts of previous criminals.27 By all accounts
Sheppard was a charming enough individual when he so desired to be.
While he was imprisoned he was described as being “always cheerful and
pleasant” and entertaining his guests with the tales of his deeds.28 His
charm and banter was another thing that would have endeared him to the
populace. Had he been unpleasant to be around perhaps his legend would
not have remained as strong in their hearts and minds. Regardless, it can
be assumed that Defoe also found Sheppard’s manner to be somewhat

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., xxviii.
endearing. Although he does not condone his crimes, Defoe presents him in a more forgiving light that could be seen as “often indulgent” and his actions as somewhat “romantic.”

In contrast, Defoe also wrote the account of Sheppard’s counterpart and nemesis, Jonathan Wild. In this work, Defoe kept the same literary style as before by showing Wild as a human being with a past and the causes that created his fall into villainy; but where he could forgive Sheppard his vices, he gave Wild “very little mercy.” Holmes seems to highlight the discrepancy in the way the world and Defoe saw these two criminals by saying Defoe was as able to paint Sheppard in the style of an “ambiguous hero” but Wild as an “unambiguous villain.” Not that any way of writing the account of Jack Sheppard’s life could have made him any less of an interesting subject at this point, the king, himself, was said to have found Sheppard’s escapes amusing and wanted to see all of the new material that was out about him.

Years later Ainsworth would pen the words that Jack Sheppard, upon his death at Tyburn, was “launched into eternity!” The words could not have been more true. After his death at the Tyburn tree, Jack’s fame skyrocketed monumentally. The people of London just could not get enough of him. Memoirs of his life sold quickly, playwrights such as John Gay quickly got to work, newspapers continued to print poems and “letters” by a deceased Sheppard, and on it went. Even years after his death Jack Sheppard’s story remained in the consciousness of the people in the old plays about him and through various penny novels.

29 Ibid., xxvi.
30 Ibid., xxvi.
31 Ibid., xxii.
32 Bleackley, 36-37.
33 W. Harrison Ainsworth, Jack Sheppard: A Romance (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1846), 457.
In the eighteenth century, Harrison Ainsworth brought a revived interest to the life and deeds of Jack Sheppard by writing a novel about him. It was called *Jack Sheppard: A Romance* and was a type of book known at the time as a Newgate novel. In this book he wrote Jack as a sympathetic and heroic figure and romanticized the life of a thief.

His book was an instant success. The story of Sheppard found as rich an audience in the 19th century as it had in the eighteenth. The tale of this legendary prison breaker who defied authority and could not be restrained by chains, or walls, locks or thief takers, society or prisons would have found a ready audience among the factory workers and middle class people of this time. Ainsworth found inspiration from Hogarth’s *Industry and Idleness*, a set of twelve engravings made in 1747 depicting two apprentices, in which the idle apprentice bears a striking resemblance of, and is very likely based on, Jack Sheppard.34

Ainsworth’s novel instantly spawned off-shoot Sheppard stories and at least eight versions of it in play form. In fact, Jack Sheppard soon became a sort of “cult figure” comparable to any number of fads we have today. One man writing a letter to his mother remarking on the Sheppard craze wrote, “at the Coubourg people are waiting about the lobbies, selling Sheppard-bags -- a bag containing a few pick-locks that is, a screw driver, and iron lever...”35

Ainsworth had the novel first serialized in *Bentley’s Magazine* from January 1839 to February 1840, the same magazine *Oliver Twist* was publicized in. When *Jack Sheppard* came out, it outsold Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. In October of 1839, *Jack Sheppard* was published in book form, and it sold 3,000 the first week it was out and 18,000 in the 2nd edition.

34 Ibid., xxxvii.
During the 1830’s Ainsworth was “more eminent than even Dickens.”\textsuperscript{36} The story of Jack Sheppard struck a particular chord with the youth of this time. In the mid nineteenth century, R. H. Horne, a sub-commissioner in Wolverhampton, wrote that many of the poor factory children had never heard of many of the best known names of the time including Wellington, Napoleon Bonaparte, St. Paul, Moses, and even the name of the queen herself. However, they all had a “general knowledge of the character and course of life…of Jack Sheppard.”\textsuperscript{37} From the lodging-houses to the streets, from the workhouses to the theaters, London was once again speaking of Jack Sheppard. A seventeen year old vagrant told his interviewer, “I’ve read ‘Jack Sheppard’ through in three volumes; and I used to tell stories out of that.”\textsuperscript{38} Another eighteen year old told how he and his friends would check the books from the library to read aloud, “We used to think Jack and them very fine fellows. I wished I could be like Jack.”\textsuperscript{39}

Not everyone saw the Sheppard books as an innocent method of escapism or a pleasant way to pass the time though. Some people believed that it was dangerous to hold criminals like Sheppard in such a high regard and present their deeds as heroic. Matthew Mayhew, the author of a four volume set of books in which he interviews the poor of London, was just such a person. Mayhew’s interpretation of Ainsworth’s novel was that “of all the books; perhaps none has ever had so baneful an effect upon the young mind, taste, and principles as this. None has ever done more to degrade literature to the level of the lowest licentiousness…or author…

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. xviii
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 370.
guilty of pandering to the most depraved propensities.”

He was not alone in thinking this either. A newspaper at the time, the Standard, describes it as “almost endless rubbish, balderdash, twaddle, and vulgarity.” Many people held to the view that it was the “most threatening and subversive of all such crime fictions.” They blamed the Sheppard novel on the corruption of youth in London, and in 1852, the House of Commons made an inquiry into the “situation of Criminal and Destitute Juveniles.” The juveniles in question cited Jack Sheppard as what had led them to “their ruin.”

John puts society’s negative reaction to the Jack Sheppard novels and the criminal they were based on down to the changing of the times. “The individuality and amorality of the protagonists of these novels was disparaged largely because the Romantic age of heroes and rebellion was being replaced by a time when social responsibility and duty were the watchwords.” Regardless of the Victorian views on Jack, Jack Sheppard and the other Newgate novels were important in the further development of the crime fiction genre. They were able to bridge the gap between the eighteenth century criminal fictions such as Defoe’s Moll Flanders and the works done in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Undoubtedly, the novel Jack Sheppard was the most important and influential of these novels.

In any era that the story of Jack Sheppard is told in, it will find willing listeners. His is a tale of more than just a petty thief escaping from justice. His tale has become a story of resistance in the face of oppression and rebellion against authority. These subjects will always have an

40 Mayhew, 370.
41 John, xxxix.
42 John, vi.
43 Ibid., x.
44 Ibid., li.
audience as long as humans continue to strive for freedom. The effect of Jack Sheppard’s life in the hearts and minds of his contemporaries and the even longer-lasting effect he had on the literary world cannot be denied.