Moritz Alexander Maier

De/mythologizing Jack the Ripper

Fictional Appropriations as a Metanarrative
of Constructing and Reading Serial Murder

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Acknowledgements

This book on the (meta)history of fictionalised Jack the Ripper has a somewhat long-winding history of its own. Like others of my generation, my own fascination with the subject was kindled back in presumably 2002 by the cinematic experience of the movie *From Hell*, though in truth not so much by this rite of initiation provided by the film adaptation but rather by follow-up reading of the original graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, lent to me by fellow student and partner in cinema crimes, Sven Schmalfuß – to whom many thanks for this fateful loan. In hindsight, while this text indeed put the Ripper on my cultural radar, it also served as an early seed for later interests in adaptation, intertextuality, metafiction, myth, and also the works of Alan Moore specifically, all of which came back together in the current book. More immediately, Moore then through *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* provided an entry point into (Neo)Victoriana and the interplay between the Ripper's contemporaries Dracula, Jekyll & Hyde, and Sherlock Holmes, all culturally iconic fascinating figures in their own right and yet strangely linked by the Ripper, as the reader will notice. Seen in this light, intertextuality and following its traces has more or less become a way of life.

Despite unmistakably having been driven by a personal fascination with its subject matter(s), however, this book is simultaneously also the product of a doctoral thesis and as such demanded years of laborious work, thorough research and critical attention, as well as immensely benefitted from the generous support and lots of feedback from my immediate academic community, friends and family.

First and foremost, I am eternally indebted and grateful to my family; my late mother Christina Pflanz-Maier, missed but lovingly remembered, who enduringly believed in me and supported my school and subsequent academic education regardless of obstacles, and my brother Felix, who despite the usual sibling rivalry in younger years later always looked out for me. I would not write these words today without them. Secondly, endless gratitude goes to my doctoral supervisor Stefan Horlacher, who took me in at the Chair of English Literature at TU Dresden and under his wing, believed in my project, patiently guided me with knowledgeable advice and emotional support, and pulled off the feat to convince me to finally let go and hand the thesis in when the time came. Next, gratitude is likewise due to my secondary supervisors Thomas Kühn and the late Christoph Houswitschka. Over the years and many an occasion, they never tired of giving me helpful feedback or advice. Heartfelt gratitude goes to my colleagues, Wieland Schwanebeck, always willing to lend an ear or offer help, as well as fellow PhD candidates Ulrike Kohn, Mirjam Frotscher, Gesine Wegner, Bettina Jansen, and Franziska Röber, whose support and always welcome company and friendship throughout the time of our shared academic ordeal holds many treasured memories, as well as to Andrea Kiel, who was always there for us as both a protector from administrative distractions and as a friend. I would be remiss if I did not mention the numerous fantastic student helpers with whom I had the pleasure to share office room 3.17 over the years (Nadja, Johanna, Annika, Anika, Tatiana, Celine, Jonas), and lastly my students, who in a hand-

ful of Ripper-related or thematically adjacent courses centred or occasionally readjusted my focus on details with their interested participation and questions. Of great value were also the discussions and conversations with the professors (Anette Pankratz, Anja Müller, Pascal Fischer, Felix Sprang, alongside the aforementioned Stefan Horlacher and Christoph Houswitschka) and PhD candidates of the infamous "BaBoDreSie" colloquium circle as well as with fellow ICFA members during various Captivating Criminality conferences, so thank you to all of them, especially Kerstin-Anja Münderlein who represents both. Likewise, the support of the "PROMI-Projekt" and fellow PhD candidates from various disciplines within it, Jana, Susanne, and especially the online group of Anette, Juliane, Simone, Sabine, Laura, and Markus over the forsaken pandemic period, was well appreciated and deserves credit. Arriving at the last steps of this project, I thank Erwin Otto and Petra Vock-Nußbaum from WVT for turning my manuscript into this book, as well as Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning for giving it a home in their ELCH/ELK series. Coming to a close, I am enormously grateful to (as well as for) the many friends in my life who over the years put up with me regularly bringing along my work to social gatherings, particularly to the festive events and merry weekends spent at their homes or in their gardens, and lastly I want to thank my partner Marion for her patience over the last year, suffering me and my unwillingness to let this book go.

Speaking of the devil: Even though pushing this book finally into print comes as an enormous relief, I suspect that there are those among postdocs with a lingering feeling of still not being done and free of their research subject. This book concludes a doctoral thesis but ultimately is by no means exhaustive about the everchanging Ripper myth. Newer research has since probed into areas that would have broken the already broad scope here and produced a chapter on female versions of the Ripper published elsewhere in the context of Captivating Criminality[*], which may not be the last such continuation. Neither is there any end in sight for new Ripper fiction – should time permit, a blog might be in order to follow as well as discuss in somewhat lighter manner newcomers and the many leftovers that did not make it into this book.

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[*] Maier, Moritz A. "Jill and Jack, the Rippers? Gender Politics and Constructing the (Female) Sex Murderer." *Crime Fiction, Femininities and Masculinities. Proceedings of the 8th Captivating Criminality Conference*. Ed. Kerstin-Anja Münderlein. Bamberg: U of Bamberg P, 2024. 190-206.

1. Introduction: Reflections on a Cultural Phenomenon

Whitechapel, 1888: for a brief spell during the autumn months of that year, an unidentified perpetrator murdered as well as mutilated a number of women commonly supposed to have been prostitutes, held the bewildered public in awe and hysteria with 'his'[1] heinous deeds and the apparent impossibility of his detection and capture, and then vanished again as quickly as he had seemingly materialised out of the dark night and into the foggy streets of London's East End. Yet from a different standpoint, it would also be true to state that he never really went away. The persona that had been fashioned for the killer by the media – namely 'Jack the Ripper' – has been an enduring one, and the tales of his exploits during the so-called "autumn of terror"[2] have attained legendary status. Plentiful myths surround him ever since, the cause for and in turn simultaneously the result of countless armchair detectives over the years taking upon themselves the quest to solve the mystery and uncover the Ripper's true identity, to the point that 'Ripperology' has become a lucrative and prolific industry in its own right. Its production cycle churns out a steady stream of ever new – or at least updated, or even only re-cycled – publications whether of serious intent or confounded in popular entertainment, and extends into related cultural areas such as tourism including guided tours of the crime locations complete with souvenirs. Without a doubt, the abundance of such historiographic material in popular culture has contributed in no small part to the lasting image of this infamous iconic villain. And yet, his story would only be half-told without the equally large abundance of fictive accounts that tell his tale, or even just drop the name and thereby serve as perpetual reminders of his presence, and paradoxically also his absence.

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1   Since the killer was never identified, the presumption of a male perpetrator is in itself already problematic because it is necessarily an act of interpretation. Regardless of perceived plausibility, it is an assumption based mostly on circumstantial evidence such as potential sightings by witnesses, criminological experience, etc. In spite of this deficiency, however, on a conceptual level the male identity (as attributed) is inherently part of the very name given to the killer. This study therefore follows the gender-biased convention for the sake of its slight sense of linguistic coherence in what is effectively an incoherent mystery full of unknown variables and fragmentary significance. For now, this semiological choice has to be defended by stating full awareness of the conundrum of codification as well as professing an intention to deconstruct it in due time. It is furthermore worth pointing out that the predominantly if not almost exclusively male serial killer is indeed a firmly established convention in the cultural construction and representation of such figures, as is addressed in many of its facets below. Tellingly enough, it is to striking effect of contrast when Jack turns out to be Jill the Ripper in a few exceptional stories.

2   The expression seems to derive from Tom Cullen's 1965 book of the same name, subtitled: *Jack the Ripper, His Crimes & Times* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965). Premier Ripperology website casebook.org describes it in its review as "[o]ne of the founding texts of the study. Outdated in numerous aspects, but a worthwhile read to reveal just how much we have learned in the past three decades", it is also illustrative of the enduring appeal of catching phrases and titles, one might add.

Acknowledging that in practice neither aspect can ever be fully independent of the other because they seem reciprocally linked in many subtle ways, it is primarily this fictional dimension too often overshadowed by the allure of the criminological puzzle and neglected which deserves critical examination in the following.

1.1 Research interest: a cultural puzzle and its narrative possibilities

One lingering question that has perplexed numerous writers, and increasingly more so as the decades since the Ripper's reign have continued to add up, is exactly why his image is still as present today as it had been right after the fact. Rather than fading into history, its hold over the popular imagination has – if anything – only strengthened. Despite the growing temporal distance to the actual events, it is evident that the Ripper has attained a lasting status which makes his a sort of household name most people will have at the very least encountered or heard of and thus can form a vague but distinct idea of whom or what the name signifies. In this respect, the Ripper joins a set of prolific cultural figures such as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Dracula, or Sherlock Holmes, to name only a few that interestingly are immediate contemporaries of the late-Victorian Ripper. This set could be extended almost at will either along a diachronic axis or a gradient of fame or infamy[3]. And yet, it is also apparent in contrast that such prominent status has been mostly denied to subsequent real-life serial killers, e.g. Ian Brady and Myra Hindley (a.k.a. the Moors Murderers), Peter Sutcliffe (the Yorkshire Ripper), or their American counterparts (for instance H. H. Holmes, Ed Gein or Ted Bundy), whose names now remain known, but mostly to those with an active interest in the subject matter. This begs the question, why Jack? What makes the Ripper special, perhaps even unique?

Answers to these questions have been proposed from a variety of angles and to varying success. The scope begins with the idea of primacy, the brazen but frankly unsupportable claim of the Ripper as the first serial killer ever, which occasionally has more thoughtfully been modified subsequently to the more sustainable notion of the first modern serial killer[4]. However, aside from the relativity of the shock value of novelty it implies, this revision hints at a different common but more complex answer which takes into account the historical context. The problems of rampant urbanisation as well as related class strife or race and gender issues, all have been linked to 1888 as a tumultuous time of unrest and anxieties. Additionally, the rise of New Journalism has been causally linked to the Ripper's grasp on the public, both by providing an unprecedentedly accessible forum for the news discourse as well as more actively sensationalizing and exploit-

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3   The current cultural repertoire also includes some lesser-known Victorians like Spring-heeled Jack and Sweeney Todd, as well as many figures from different eras past and more recent (e.g. King Arthur, Robin Hood, but also modern examples like Batman or James Bond).

4   Point in case, occasionally the initial claim does not even make it to the end of the book or broadcast without acknowledging the modification, revealing its sole purpose as a provocative title (cf. *Revealed* 2006; Odell 2006).

ing the situation (cf. Curtis 2001). While these arguments are plausible and convincing in and of themselves, and it is entirely conceivable that the Ripper's infamy is the specific product of these and perhaps more social and cultural factors colliding at the precise moment during which he struck, other writers have approached matters from yet another perspective. Some have argued that the Ripper has not only shone a light on but has himself been a product of the dark side of modernity, the result of urban alienation, of industrialisation and serialisation (cf. Seltzer 1998; Warwick 2007: 72), or of a growing infatuation with media and identity politics bent on celebrity (cf. Schmid 2005). The most common and obvious answer, however, is also the one that is most profound and at the same time unfortunately remains underdeveloped: The Ripper continues to appeal because he was never identified – he remains a mystery.

As insightful and convincing as all of this is, from the standpoint of this study it also does not go far enough. Although providing plausible answers to why the Ripper came to such notoriety in the first place, these explanations (with the tentative exception of the last) fall short in actually elucidating how this popular appeal has been sustained. In spite of his pioneering position, the Ripper has long since been surpassed by many of his successors in terms of the cruelty and outrageousness of their *modi operandi* as well as the sheer numbers of their 'kill counts'. While the social, political and cultural issues plaguing fin-de-siècle Victorians have hardly been overcome as a whole, times have changed enough so that the immediate context of the historical murders should be less relevant or impactful to today's readers or audiences than his contemporaries. And yet, the Ripper is not a – however remarkable – footnote of history but is still an active participant in culture today. To some extent, the simple answer to the Ripper's cultural persistence can be found already hidden in plain sight within an elaborated version of the question. Why is the Ripper just as well-known as some of the most prolific literary characters of the last few centuries, while other perhaps technically more impressive real-life serial killers are not? Is it because they, in contrast, are only comparatively rarely subject to fiction? Realizing the undisputable role of fiction and more specifically fictionalization in the proliferation of the Ripper story, however, is not an entirely satisfying explanation, either. The Ripper is not only different from his real-life successors, but he is simultaneously different from the fictional characters named above. This is because he is part of both worlds, fact and fiction, simultaneously; i.e. he is interdiscursive.

Another unique aspect, which is directly related to this interdiscursive nature as well as the unsolved mystery surrounding the original murders, is the difficulty to pinpoint an exact origin or source of Ripper stories beyond the general area of the fragmentary historical case. In this respect, the Ripper resembles and perhaps even surpasses figures of traditional mythology, whose exact origins often are lost. Nevertheless, and this much is true of the quasi-mythic literary specimen as well, they usually have a conceptual point of origin at which a figure and its meaning, signifier and signified, come into existence together. Sometimes, this point can be nominally verified and traced to a single source (e.g. Bram Stoker publishes his novel). At other times, this perceived point is actually part of a process in which now lost but hypothetically co-existing polyphonic

sources and intertexts undergo selective and streamlining canonisation (e.g. medieval scribes write down a version of the oral legends of Robin Hood; Stoker re-defines the vampire, pushing its literary precursors into temporary obscurity[5]). It is exactly in this respect that the Ripper differs slightly from all these other figures insofar as the paradox between these perspectives is brought to the surface much more actively and overtly. It is, because on the one hand there is always the historical series of murders as a definite point of reference, yet on the other hand there is the unsolvable mystery which causes a polysemy precluding or at least counteracting full canonisation. What is special about the Ripper is therefore actually less an inherent quality but rather the absence of such a quality, which turns the figure into a blank canvas for the projection of almost any arbitrary meaning (within reasonable limits).

One may counter that this variability can apply equally to the other figures and characters[6] (later developments transform Spring-heeled Jack from a harmful prowling ghost to a vigilante, modern Dracula transforms into a romantic antihero, recent Superman becomes a symbol for authoritarian power), and this is true in principle. Then again, such transformations can usually be identified clearly as deviations, as (revisionist) countermovement to a previously established canon. The Ripper's adaptability, by contrast, does not so much reflect reactions directed against a pre-formed status quo than a continued formation and re-formation of more or less temporary expressions of ideas both old[7] and new in flux (unless one decides to reduce and consider them on a basic level of archetypes). Therefore, they are not bound by a dialogic (in the strict literal sense of the word meaning between two entities) but offer a freer form of interplay, which can also offer another explanation for the striking diversity of the Ripper-text.

All of the above demands a more differentiated re-evaluation of the initial research question and prompts follow-up considerations. If the Ripper is indeed characterised by a duality between the iconic (everyone can recognise the Ripper) and the blank (he can take on a wide variety of meanings), then determining the latter in any individual in-

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5   Of course, Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), and even Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47) have since made a comeback into popular culture, as have their folkloric ancestors. A similar fate, ironically, had in turn befallen even Stoker's novel for a while, more or less forgotten for several decades of the 20th century during which Dracula's popular cultural presence rested mostly on transformative screen adaptations.

6   Although the two terms may appear to be used interchangeably, this distinction is important even if the concepts in many ways overlap and often both apply to the figures discussed here simultaneously. While a "[c]haracter is a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld" (Jannidis 2013) and is distinguished from real-world persons, the term figure implies that this distinction can be blurred and depends on the recognition of context, even can be transcended. This is obvious when fictionalisation transforms persons into characters, but conversely also applies when characters transcend their text and become seen as legendary, i.e. cultural if not historical figures.

7   This does not categorically rule out any element of revisionist reaction; but if there is, it is not against a fixed canon but a temporary accumulation of problematic ideas which already can prompt backlash before canonisation.