"In different shapes and forms": Spring-Heeled Jack and the Power of Perception in Victorian Transmedia

Amanda Farage

Abstract
A mysterious man in 1830s England, eventually dubbed Spring-Heeled Jack in contemporary news reports, spent several months terrorising unsuspecting people in the nighttime streets by clawing their faces, spewing flames from his mouth, and then bounding away. During his menacing spree, newspapers throughout the country enflamed public hysteria with numerous articles detailing the "outrages" committed by the "fiend". For no discernible reason, the attacks stopped as suddenly as they began and no more was heard about the man. Yet, a few decades later, he was resurrected in the public consciousness through various fictional genres as a character who was not a crazed villain but rather a misunderstood antihero who repented of his past actions. These skillful reconfigurations on the stage and in penny dreadfuls changed public perception about Jack from the horror and fear of his real-world behaviour to excitement and intrigue at his fictional exploits. Through a consideration of the language and tone of the original news articles combined with a close-reading of some of the later penny serials, this paper details the ways in which different media and their conventions shaped the public's attitude towards Jack, and asserts his significance as a pervasive transmedial character of the Victorian era.

Keywords
Spring-Heeled Jack; transmedia; transfiction; penny serials; nineteenth-century newspapers

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"In different shapes and forms": Spring-Heeled Jack and the Power of Perception in Victorian Transmedia

Amanda Farage

Between 1837 and 1838, London newspapers detailed a mysterious figure accosting victims in the nighttime streets, terrifying them with his strange, dark face covering and the blue flames he purportedly spewed from his mouth. While the man (or bear, or devil, or ghost, depending on the witness) appeared "in different shapes and forms" (Coates [1863] 2020: 1), in each instance, the assailant was reported as being able to leap great distances and thus became known popularly through newspaper articles as Spring-Heeled Jack. In these early reports, he was clearly a villain who had no discernible motive for his devious behaviour and who vanished almost as quickly as he appeared. However, over a decade later, Spring-Heeled Jack re-emerged in the public consciousness through stage plays, penny serials, and even a comic ballet. While some of these fictional renderings presented him as a criminal figure, by the 1860s he had been reimagined as an antiheroic character who protected the defenceless in English society. As Karl Bell notes in his definitive study of the figure, Spring-Heeled Jack became a "misunderstood hero rather than a villain," or indeed, someone who had shifted from "being a figure of fear to a figure of fun" and adventure (Bell 2012: 178-179). Thus, as one of the most transformative Victorian figures, Jack is a significant character to attend to in a study of the ability of transmedia portrayals to shape public perception.

To fully appreciate his journey through the nineteenth century, we must first clarify the theoretical framework in which the figure can be situated. Whilst transmediality and transfictionality are two concepts that have become more familiar in the twenty-first century with the rise of multimedia franchises and fictional universes spanning varied platforms, including films, books, tabletop roleplaying games, television shows, graphic novels, and video games, scholars have shown that these notions existed well before our current time.[1] Characters

[1] For recent discussions of transmediality and transfictionality in earlier historical periods, see Matthew Freeman's *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth Century Story Worlds* (2017), Lissette Lopez Szwydky's consideration of adaptation studies and transfictional characters, *Transmedia Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century* (2020), and Christina Meyer's and Monika Piertzak-Franger's

can be considered transmedial or transfictional when they "persist between representations, outside of the boundaries of the individual works and potentially beyond the purview of the creator who originally invented them" (Haugtvedt 2022: 6). Thus, while a figure might first appear in a book, when another iteration of the same individual appears in a film or a video game and is identified by the audience as the same one regardless of the platform in which it is found, it has become a transmedial character. For a creation to be considered transfictional, it need only appear in at least two fictional works, whether those works are in the same medium or not. Since Spring-Heeled Jack appears across various fiction and nonfiction modes, I will refer to him in this paper as a specifically transmedial character, using transmediality as a theoretical scaffold particularly suited to this figure, and one with which scholarship has not often directly engaged when discussing Jack.

In her work on transfictional and transmedial characters in the British long nineteenth century, Erica Haugtvedt theorises that, while these "persistent entities" originate in fiction, they are ultimately "modelled on real persons" in the minds of readers or viewers who encounter them (13). In order for such figures to exist outside of their original medium, audiences must contribute to the crafting of characters beyond their initial creation, by thinking of them, inquiring about them, and forming a mental scaffolding in which to place them through comparisons to real life individuals. The audience ultimately keeps the characters alive through a blending of fiction and reality. Hardly any figure epitomises the palimpsestical nature of transmedial characters more than Spring-Heeled Jack. The interwoven relationship between reality and fiction is made overtly manifest when we consider that Jack first appeared in nonfiction news reports detailing a real person's actions, being revived in fictional genres later in the century and completely reimagined to appeal to the public he had once terrorised.

Sightings of the figure first abounded in the villages surrounding London, but these occurrences were not officially reported in *The Times* until 9 January 1838, when a "Resident of Peckham" sent an open letter to the Lord Mayor of London. In this correspondence, the writer asserted that the newspapers had been ignoring a spate of attacks in the "many villages near London" by the as-yet-unnamed Spring-Heeled Jack (qtd. Dash 1996: 45). According to the resident, these attacks were popularly believed to be the work of several men of the "higher ranks of life" who amused themselves by dressing up as either "a ghost, a bear, [or] a devil" to frighten unsuspecting villagers (qtd. Dash 1996: 45). In his research on the subject, J. S. Mackley builds upon the claims of the Peckham Resident and contends that various other reports of the assailant from this period purported that he appeared as "a ghost, imp, devil, a man in armour, a white bear or white bull, a demon or a baboon" (2021: 40). The Peckham letter thus set the precedent of Spring-Heeled Jack being associated with upper-class or aristocratic men and established his supposed shapeshifting ability, characteristics which would both feature in his fictionalisations later in the century.

After his first forays in English villages, Spring-Heeled Jack traversed the rural-urban divide and began a brief reign of terror in London in February of the same year. Although there are contemporary reports of only three London attacks in total and the details of each incident vary, several common themes allowed all three to be ascribed to one figure. In each instance, the attacker wore some form of head covering, carried a lamp, and allegedly spewed blue flames from his mouth. Once Jack appeared in London, rather than its suburbs, he "fitted neatly into a long tradition of metropolitan hellraisers, 'monsters', and street roisters," whether lower-class scoundrels or aristocratic gangs, such as the "Mohocks" who terrorised working-class

edited collection on Victorian audience practices and engagement across media, *Transmedia Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2022).

victims (Bell 2012: 62-63).[2] Two of his most infamous assaults transpired only one week apart, and since both incidents involved young middle to lower class women, they captured the public's consciousness and became the focus of newspaper reports for the next several months. His most brutal attack occurred on 20 February 1838, when eighteen-year-old Jane Alsop suffered violent scratches and had some hair ripped out before her sister pulled her back inside their home. Then on 28 February, he accosted Lucy Scales and her sister in a Limehouse street and "puffed a quantity of blue flame" in Lucy's face, causing her to faint before he bounded away in powerful boots ("Ghost" 1838: 4).

With the onset of his attacks in London, numerous reports detailing and sensationalising the incidents began to be published in newspapers. On 25 February 1838, London's *The Examiner* included a segment entitled, "Outrage on a Young Lady" which declared that while "many among the public have been hitherto incredulous as to the truth of various representations . . . of the gambols of 'Spring-heeled Jack', the suburban ghost," they would soon believe in this villain after reading the sordid details of this attack ("Outrage" 1838: 12). This report was a verbatim reprint of a 22 February article in *The Times* in which Jack's name had been publicly attached to an attack for the first time. The newspaper describes how a man posing as a policeman asked Jane to bring him a candle, as he had supposedly apprehended Spring-Heeled Jack. When she did so, "he threw off his outer garment, and, applying the lighted candle to his breast, presented a most hideous and frightful appearance, and vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flame from his mouth, and his eyes resembled red balls of fire" (12). From the word choices of "hideous" and "frightful" to the descriptions of his spewing flames and glowing red eyes, this report, while ostensibly an objective recitation of Jane's account, is clearly designed to incite an emotional and fearful response in the reader.

When Spring-Heeled Jack accosted Jane and began ripping at her dress and hair with "considerable violence," she managed to escape and run back toward her house before he caught her again, only being freed when one of her sisters came out to chase him away (12). After the attack, the article informs the public that Jane spent the night "in extreme pain . . . [from] the wounds and scratches inflicted by the miscreant about her shoulders and neck with his claws or hands" (12). While the Resident of Peckham had accused the newspapers of being "still silent on the subject" of Jack's attacks in the villages (qtd. Dash 1996: 45), they had now found a subject with which they could engage readers' attention by stoking their fears.

Three days after *The Examiner's* article, London's *Morning Post* published a report on what it deemed "The Late Outrage at Old Ford."[3] The *Post* recounts that an officer, inspector, and superintendent of the police had been consulted, and all came to the same conclusion regarding investigations into the particular viciousness of Jane's attack. They concurred that "a violent outrage . . . had been committed" but that the attacker was most likely a drunk and not "the individual who was stated to have made his appearance in different outlets of the metropolis in so many different shapes" ("Late" 1838: 4). Regardless of the apparent dismissal

[2] Spring-Heeled Jack's identity was never discovered in the nineteenth century and remains unknown to this day, but amateur sleuths of the era theorised that his London antics were the actions of a bored aristocrat amusing himself through a campaign of terror.

[3] Versions of the article could be found in the succeeding days in other London and home counties' newspapers. These copies included the same story as the initial *Times* report, but with different titles. For instance, *The Essex, Herts and Kent Mercury* title emphasised the villain's name as it read, "Spring Heeled Jack – Outrage on a Young Lady" (28 February 1838: 2), while the *London Observer*'s article began with an allusion to what Jack was called before his moniker became widespread, "The Ghost Again – A Strange Story" (11 March 1838: 4).

of Spring-Heeled Jack's culpability in this instance, the incident was still labelled an "outrage" and all three men determined to solve the case within the next few days (4).

In this news story, we find the insistent repetition of the word "outrage," beginning in the first account, a word which, despite the matter-of-fact tone of the reporting, is distinctly used to enflame readers' emotional states. The article concludes with remarks by the police that "it was important, in order to allay the excitement which the outrage was calculated to produce, that the most strict and searching investigation on the subject should take place . . . to elicit the truth" (4). Aside from one final use of "outrage," we see the newspaper relay the entreaty for a calm and rational approach to Spring-Heeled Jack's attacks whilst simultaneously continuing to incite the very "excitement" the police were trying to dispel, but upon which the news relied for continued readership.

The London *Planet* escalated this language in its 4 March issue with an article entitled "Spring Heeled Jack – The Nocturnal Assaults, Upon Respectable Females, By the Above Monster; His Capture and Examination." Although "the miscreant" was supposedly apprehended and identified as a blacksmith with a "forbidding" and "deformed" countenance "calculated to excite terror in females," the attacks and accosting of women on London streets continued due to various imitators ("Nocturnal" 1838: 5). The *Planet's* account includes a concerned letter by former admiral and current MP Sir Edward Codrington that expressed his alarm at the fact that "there is something so very dastardly, so diabolical in the conduct of the monster" in his terrorising of unsuspecting women (5). With alliterative flair, Codrington denounces Spring-Heeled Jack's behaviour and elevates his categorisation from that of mischief-maker to monster. The newspaper concurs with Codrington's dismay and further stresses that the "alarm which the outrage has created at the east end of the metropolis is considerable, so much so that females are afraid to move a yard from their dwellings after dusk, unless they are very well-protected" (5). Concurrent with the heightened language of outrages and miscreants, this article demonstrates the breathless emphasis that journalists and the commentators they interviewed put on the gendered nature of Jack's attacks – and the resulting feminine panic – in continued attempts to maximise the public's agitation and foreground his fiendishness.

The news of Spring-Heeled Jack's nefarious deeds began spreading further afield within the week, and the *Leeds Mercury* published a small blurb on 3 March stating, "A fellow who goes by the name of the Suburban Ghost, or 'Spring-heeled Jack,' has latterly been committing outrageous assaults upon females and others in the lonely parts of the metropolis" (*Leeds Mercury* 1838: 7). Despite the brevity of this report, there are two points of note – first, that the attacks are still being attributed to Spring-Heeled Jack (police assurances otherwise notwithstanding), and second, that the paper accentuates the sensational nature of the episodes by labeling them with the familiar words ("outrageous assaults") while also, once again, foregrounding the sex of the victims.

The final appearances of the figure in newspapers of this time occurred in a few brief mentions during May 1838, including one in the 19 May issue of the *Leeds Mercury*. This short write-up references "Spring-heeled Jack" in dubious quotes and notes how he is "playing his pranks" in Whitby ("Playing" 1838: 7). Hearkening back to his earliest appearances as a shapeshifter, this account notes he attacked a woman while in "the shape of a bear," leaving her clothes torn and her face "much injured and disfigured" by claws that were "firmly fixed in his hands" (7). Calling him a "mischievous vagabond," the reporter displays some Northern pride in their hopes that the Yorkshire police accomplish "that which the London police-officers were unable to do – cage him" (7). This account details an obviously violent attack, yet it has a relatively unperturbed tone about the incident: one that is absent from the hyperbolic

language of the London papers, and which is not even used in the stories published in this same paper in March 1838. Jack's actions are not assaults, but merely pranks; he is no longer dastardly, but simply mischievous. Despite the terror initially caused by Jack and the subsequent amplification in various news reports, by mid-1838, the newspapers had "lost interest" and mentions of the villainous figure in nonfiction outlets ceased (Clarke 1996: 48). As the figure lost his sensational coverage in the newspapers, so, too, did the public begin to lose interest in these episodes, and their fear of the villain decreased.

Yet during this time, two curious mentions of Spring-Heeled Jack, or rather the idea of him, are found in the 17 April 1838 issue of London's *The Standard*. In a section detailing the latest activities around the Royal Pavilion theatre, the reporter employs oblique references to Jack twice to describe the people milling around on a bright spring day. Amongst the proliferation of vendors selling "lollipops and gilt gingerbread, children's toys and frippery," the report notes that "spring-heeled jacks" were also available for purchase ("Pavilion" 1838: 4). Precisely what these toys were remains unknown, although perhaps the term refers to jack-in-the-boxes or springs for children's shoes.[4] The writer later describes different forms of street entertainment, including the "charms of Spring-heeled Jack, seen [quite] as large as life, for the small charge of [one] hapenny" (4). These references illustrate the nascent changes in the public's perception of Jack from fearful entity to entertaining character.

A brief flare of interest in dramatising Spring-Heeled Jack through other platforms also arose during the initial period following his London assaults. The first of these transmedia portrayals took shape as a "hurriedly-penned" play that was performed within a couple of weeks of Jack's first two attacks in the city (Mackley 2020: viii). Presumably, Jack was portrayed as a nefarious character at this time, although no details of the play have been found. This was the only fictional representation of Spring-Heeled Jack concomitant with his real-world escapades, and it most probably expanded upon the sensationalist reporting of his villainy found in the newspapers and the fact that his identity was never uncovered.

The ensuing years saw a more marked shift in the platforms through which Jack was presented for public consumption. Victorian social commentator James Greenwood asserted that the scale of a basic story's receptive impact was influenced by three popular cultural modes of the period: literary works, visual media, and theatrical performances. Although "cheap literature was prone to stirring the imagination," visual images had a more "immediate and accessible" effect on audiences, while theatre performances in which the characters were brought to life had the greatest appeal and impact (Bell 2012: 170). As Greenwood hyperbolically proclaimed, "it is one thing to *read* about the flashing and slashing of steel blades . . . but to be satisfactory, the marrow and essence of the blood-stirring tragedy can only be conveyed to [the public] in bodily shape" (1869: 72). Whether or not these assertions were true, Spring-Heeled Jack's fictional resurrection began in the theatrical mode. Scholars such as Bell claim that we can perceive Jack, whatever form of media he appeared in, as "an early product of an emerging nineteenth-century mass culture" (2012: 199). Haugtvedt builds upon Bell's claims and also asserts that any discussion of transfictionality and transmediality in the nineteenth century must take into account the "context of socio-economic class, as the emergence of cheap printing technologies and the proliferation of economically accessible, minor theatrical productions broadened the number of leisure-time activities available to an

[4] Originally an exclusive toy only available to the wealthy in the sixteenth century, the jack-in-the-box became more broadly accessible for children beginning in the eighteenth century and was common in the Victorian era. While attaching springs to shoes as a form of entertainment (or terror) certainly predates the following example, the Victoria and Albert Museum has a pair of 1960s Mettoy children's shoe springs on display and fittingly named "Spring-Heel Jacks" ("Spring-heel" 2016).

expanding market for entertainment" (2022: 22). This burgeoning Victorian cultural awareness spanned classes, genders, and ages, and served as a means of amplifying Jack and his multitudinous representations over the decades, and throughout England, to a much greater extent than would have been possible previously, without a culture of mass production or a reading and viewing public that crossed multiple social divides.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing depictions of Spring-Heeled Jack comes in a theatrical performance a decade after his last appearance in the London streets. An 1848 advertisement in the *Hull Packet* announces a "New Comic Ballet entitled Spring Heel Jack" to be performed in Hull's Theatre-Royal. Disappointingly, no details were provided about the performance in the announcement, and there are no extant reviews. However, this adaptation of Spring-Heeled Jack's story for the stage appears to have set the emerging comedic tone for future performances, as he began his transformation from alarming street-villain to entertaining figure of fiction.

Another play featuring the character would not debut until fifteen years later when 1863 saw the production of *Spring-Heel'd Jack, or the Felon's Wrongs*, by Frederick Hazelton. This began a period of several years in which various dramas spotlighting Spring-Heeled Jack were performed around England. Indeed, two such plays were mentioned in this timeframe by the *Era*, a British weekly newspaper, known for its sports and theatrical coverage. By this time, the newspapers had relegated Jack to a person in the past "as to whom opinions fluctuate between his having been a bogey or a blackguard" (*Daily* 1863: 4). The prior language of outrages and diabolicalness had dimmed with the passage of time, allowing for a shift in the way Jack was presented to, and perceived by, the public.

Any lingering mentions of his criminality were omitted from the next stage adaptation. On 5 November 1865, the *Era* issue announced that Northampton's Theatre Royal opened the previous Saturday's evening performances with the "sensation drama of *Spring-Heeled Jack*," and then concluded Monday evening's dramas as well ("Northampton" 1858: 13). The reporter states that both evenings were well-attended, with the theatre "crowded in every available spot" (13). While it is possible that these attendance levels were due to the principal dramas of those nights, the fact that the Theatre Royal chose to use *Spring-Heeled Jack* as their pre- or post-entertainment on nights with popular main shows and large audiences indicates its positive reception. The concurrence of most of these dramas with the first major serialisation of Jack's exploits in penny fiction also signifies a symbiotic relationship between these two forms of media. Both sought to heighten the entertainment value of the figure and both wanted to attract new audiences to the character and story through sensationalisation of the dramatic mode. Unfortunately, as can be a limitation with reader-response and reception studies, there are no existing records of people's perception of these fictional resurrections of Jack. While the earlier newspaper reports provide brief snapshots of the manner in which the figure was received by the public, this coverage decreased in the latter half of the century, and so we are left to make conclusions based on more circumstantial information. Thus, the repeated stage iterations, as well as the popularity of his penny serials (and their republications) indicate a certain amount of success in changing audiences' attitudes about the character as he moved from villain to entertaining protagonist.

By September 1866, the *Era* proclaimed that, while other theatres might be showcasing "legitimate dramas," the Leeds' Theatre Royal manager instead "depends for his attractions upon the sensational school of twenty years ago," producing plays such as *Dick Turpin* ("Leeds" 1866: 12). In this vein, the theatre "as a specialty" put on a drama entitled *Spring-Heeled Jack*, which the reporter enigmatically notes as being "for the benefit of . . . operatic dancers" (12). Perhaps this performance was inspired by the 1848 comic ballet, particularly

given the note emphasising operatic dancers and the casting of a well-known Victorian clown. According to the notice, the clown Boleno Marsh[5] was loaned from the Princess' Concert Hall to give "his valuable services" as the titular character (12). In his excoriation of what he considered low-brow stage productions, Greenwood claimed that there are "many elements of a sanguinary drama that may not be well expressed in words" but which may, given the performance of a convincing actor, be embodied on stage in such a way as to positively sway audience perception of a blackguard (1869: 72). The use of Marsh, a popular performer of the time, to portray Jack indicates another attempt by playwrights to shape theatregoers' expectations of the character, moving their focus away from his villainous past and towards his entertaining reinvention. Audience familiarity and previous experiences with this well-liked clown could transfer to his depiction of Jack and lend more positive connotations to the character and his reimagining.

Spring-Heeled Jack's theatrical representations continued for the next few years, with another example described in the 23 May 1868 issue of the *Marylebone and Paddington Mercury*. Rather than a re-staging of one of the previous plays about the character, the paper highlights the upcoming play as "an entirely new drama" written for the Marylebone Theatre by the "popular author" W. Travers under the title of *Spring-Heeled Jack: or, the Terror of London* ("Marylebone" 1868: 2). The announcement entices audiences with promises of "extraordinary mechanical and spectral effects, new dresses, scenery, and appointments" (2). Based upon the title, it is probable that this drama (along with many others from this period) was inspired by the popular 1863 penny story of the same name, thereby demonstrating the character's suitability as a transmedial figure. Indeed, stories about Jack were even more prolific in literary works, particularly penny serials, than they were in stage plays.

The first and most popular serialised story of the character was the aforementioned *Spring-Heel'd Jack: The Terror of London* (1863), issued in forty parts by the Newsagents' Publishing Company. Featuring a title that could have been taken straight from the sensationalist language of the newspaper articles in the 1830s, the story was popular enough to warrant a reprint from 1866 to 1867. Mackley attributes this anonymous serial to dramatist Alfred Coates and states that the series was written for a "newly-literate audience of working-class men" (2020: viii). Bell makes a similar claim regarding the presumptive readers with the additional note that the "penny dreadfuls of the 1860s onwards were targeted at (predominantly male) juveniles" (2012: 178). While both largely male, there were clearly stark differences between the upper-class intended audience of the 1830s newspaper articles and the working-class and adolescent readers of the 1860s fictional stories. Nevertheless, each genre affected a greater portion of the English public than their initial audiences, whether by word of mouth or secondary consumption, a distribution which contributed to the overall cultural mythologising of the character. Therefore, the way Jack was presented, particularly the changes in the manner of his portrayal in the differing media, serve as relevant bellwethers for general public perception.

Unlike the real-world exploits of Spring-Heeled Jack reported in the news, his revival in this fictional serial altered his behaviour to become more palatable for reading audiences to

[5] Boleno Marsh is a fascinating figure of the mid-nineteenth century stage. A well-known clown (a comedic entertainer who could enact physical comedy, sing ribald songs, or perform in plays), he was born Alfred John Tolkien, a relative of the future author J.R.R. Tolkien. In early 1867, just a few months after his performance in *Spring-Heeled Jack*, Marsh suffered an untimely death when an onstage stunt in Hull went wrong and he fell through a window without protection ("The Week" 1867: 100). For more on the role of the clown in nineteenth-century entertainment, see Jacky Bratton's and Ann Featherstone's book, *The Victorian Clown* (2006).

digest week to week. Whereas newspapers benefitted from stirring up the public's fears and anxieties by portraying him as a frightening villain who committed horrific acts against innocent women, penny stories needed to create a character who had adventures rather than "outrages," and whose life the reader could vicariously enjoy. Moreover, whilst newspapers did not solely rely on Spring-Heeled Jack to sell their issues as he was merely one sensationalist part of their overall package, this serialised tale needed to appeal to readers positively enough to convince them to purchase it with their limited means each week. To that end, Jack no longer assaults defenceless women, but instead "targets the proud, the boasters and the corrupt" with his attacks, and only engages in "the occasional trick for its amusement value," not its terrifying effects (Mackley 2020: xi).

While there was certainly "an outcry about the content of the Penny novels and their effect on the morality of the readership" by some Victorian commentators (Mackley 2020: ix), it appears that these Spring-Heeled Jack stories induced less anxiety about potential negative influence on readers than other sensational fiction. In his essay, "A Short Way to Newgate," the prolific Greenwood avowed that penny dreadfuls were nothing less than a "plague" that "[bred] death and misery unspeakable" through deleterious storylines in which criminal characters were rewarded for their debauched behaviour and never repented of their actions (1874: 158). Though this may have been the pervasive view of many such social critics, a reviewer in London's *Daily News* during April 1886 indicated that the reprinted Spring-Heeled Jack penny serial should "to be distinguished from many of these as having in all its eccentricities the saving motive of a reform of manners" (qtd. Mackley 2020: ix). We can thereby conclude that the Spring-Heeled Jack narratives, while sensational adventure stories and not considered uplifting or improving literature, were more agreeable specifically for their reformation or reinvention of his character from a terrorising villain in the news media to an antiheroic defender in fictional form.

His reinvention is exhibited in an 1863 advertisement enticing audiences to read the upcoming series (Mackley 2020: cover). The announcement consists of an image of Spring-Heeled Jack jumping into a river where an unconscious woman floats alongside a caption and explanatory paragraph at the bottom of the page.[6] Jack is wearing his heeled boots and a black cape with his fingers extended in front of him like claws and a menacing expression on his face. Initially, this depiction seems reminiscent of the manner in which the newspapers described him several decades before, but the caption reveals he is not attacking the woman, but rather saving her: "Jack leaps into the Thames after the seamstress." The short write-up at the bottom of the page informs prospective readers that "whereas, a little over a quarter of a century ago, a person known to the police as Spring-Heeled Jack did frighten and cause the death of several persons, the daring deeds and startling adventures of this wonderful man will be published in Weekly Numbers, with Illustrations every week of his doings" (Mackley 2020: cover).

The language of this announcement reveals the shift in characterisation he has undergone from nonfictional to fictional media. Beginning with the inflated claim that Spring-

[6] This illustration is displayed on the cover of *Spring-Heel'd Jack: The Terror of London* (2020), the collection of Coates' 1863 serial issues published in bound format for the first time. It is the first book of the eight-volume Spring-Heeled Jack Library, an essential compendium of the major fictional works depicting Spring-Heeled Jack from the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. J. S. Mackley has done incredible work to collect and reprint these stories; this particular volume is invaluable as it is the first time the complete 1863 serial has been reprinted since the Victorian era. The publication was made possible after Mackley found the missing issue from the British Library's copy in the University of Los Angeles' library.

Heeled Jack killed several people in the 1830s, the sentence concludes with the promise to detail the thrilling escapades of this "wonderful man," intimating that the narrative will not be an account of a murderous madman or monster, but instead an adventure story of audacious exploits. With his debut in serial fiction, he is fully transformed from the violent criminal of the newspapers to a "champion for the vulnerable and the oppressed, and especially for women" (Mackley 2020: xi).

The opening lines of the serial further evince this transformation. The introduction takes readers back "over a quarter of a century" to the time when Spring-Heeled Jack's activities kept London "in a continual state of terror" (Coates [1863] 2020: 1). While freely admitting that he scared innocents so badly that some "never thoroughly recovered from the shock their nerves sustained," and acknowledging that a couple of people even died from fright, the author makes certain to note that Jack never robbed his victims or "ever practise[d] any other degree of cruelty beyond affrighting them" (1). Thus, while Jack's behaviour had terrible consequences, readers are informed that he did not intend to kill, or even rob, anyone but rather only delighted in causing mischief for some unspecified reason. His conduct is no longer described as an "outrage," but is instead relegated to "strange" actions and "eccentricities" of unknown explanation (1). In fact, the action of the first chapter involves Spring-Heeled Jack (in a bar without his devilish outfit) making a wager with a policeman that he would be as frightened as any person if he came upon Jack on his beat, with Jack surprising the officer later that night and scaring him before bounding away laughing. Such a harmless adventure sets the tone for the character's comportment throughout the rest of the serial and clearly differentiates this iteration of Spring-Heeled Jack from the one reported on in the papers.

One of the benefits a fictional medium has in portraying a figure such as Spring-Heeled Jack is the ability to allow him to speak and deliver his point of view to the audience. The newspapers recounted his attacks and stirred up public terror and indignation, neither of which was conducive to providing Jack's perspective, if such a thing was even possible. In contrast, Coates takes advantage of the conventions of this different form of media to make the character more sympathetic to readers. To that end, the second instalment provides readers with the first true piece of dialogue in which the character speaks more than a line or two. The paragraph is worth quoting in its entirety for the insight it provides into his changing motivations, which are reiterated throughout the rest of the story. Upon seeing a woman's shadow agitatedly moving behind a window shade in a small house and noting that she appears to be in great distress, Jack first muses aloud:

> Humph! There's something going on there which I should much like to understand – something, perhaps, which my presence might greatly tend to settle to the benefit of the woman, whoever she may be, who seems in great grief. Maybe it's only a domestic quarrel. Husband come home drunk – but, no; the attitudes of that woman are rather those of supplication than anger. I have frightened not a few lately, and now who knows but I might save one from some ill or other?
>
> (Coates [1863] 2020: 4-5)

In this passage, Spring-Heeled Jack conducts a brief form of psychological analysis of the woman in the window (later revealed to be Jane Slater, the main female protagonist of the serial) and exhibits a level of emotional deduction that is unexpected from a supposed monstrous man. Noting that her body language suggests she is not angry but rather anguished, he ponders whether his appearance would assist her with whatever difficulty in which she finds herself. This surprising altruism is clarified for the reader when he acknowledges the unsuspecting women he has previously frightened and, perhaps demonstrating some guilt over these occasions, he seems to believe that his actions now, by saving a troubled woman, could

balance his ledger of having terrorised others in the past. Such a formulation is explicitly confirmed a few paragraphs later when he determines there is indeed foul play occurring and declares, "Well, I may be able to do a good turn in part payment for the many bad ones I've had a hand in" (5). Thus, readers are given some diegetic context for Spring-Heeled Jack's re-characterisation and transformation from the newspapers to penny serial.

Jack concludes these contemplations with a reassurance to himself, "However, be what it may, it will provide food for my adventurous spirit. If I can't do no good, I at least may give them a fright" (5). Reverting to a more impish attitude after these deeper ruminations, Jack decides there can be no harm from intervening. If his first inclination to help the woman is thwarted, it will still be a worthwhile endeavour because he can always enjoy some relatively innocuous amusement by causing a scare. He might not be the villainous figure he once was, but he is still mischievous enough to be entertaining to readers of penny fiction. From the first moments of the tale, Jack's original depiction from the 1830s is discarded, and his newly reformed persona is introduced, thus immediately gaining readers' attention and changing their perception of this figure.

The ensuing adventure reveals that Spring-Heeled Jack can achieve both the aims declared in his soliloquy: he saves the unfortunate woman from being sexually coerced by her husband's employer (the aptly named Ralph Grasper) and he is able to terrify the man into running away. First, however, Jack curses the "hoary-headed scoundrel" and exclaims, "people look upon me as a villain, but they know not what villainy is" (7). Readers receive the same message in the succeeding installment from the woman he saved when she declares, "let men speak of Spring-heeled Jack as a wretch who deserves no pity; but while I live, I shall ever remember with thankfulness and gratitude the service he has rendered me and mine" (10).

Although a little heavy-handed, the message is clear: Jack is a figure who has unjustly been labeled a villain or evil-doer, when in actuality he is an antihero who might make mischief but would never intentionally harm an innocent. The narrative choice of detailing this exploit in the second and third of the weekly episodes ensures that audiences are informed from the beginning that Spring-Heeled Jack might be on the wrong side of the law, but he has a moral compass that readers can support, and he will be a character with which the public can sympathise with across his varied adventures. Unlike in the news reports of his activities, Jack in this penny dreadful is juxtaposed with truly villainous characters in order to foreground his relative heroism.

Additionally, the crimes he attempts to thwart provide a dark commentary on the life of London's lower-classes and their financial and social struggles, issues which may have been felt by many of the readers of this narrative. Spring-Heeled Jack's behaviour is modified to transform him from a terroriser of these classes to a saviour of them, and it is no coincidence that these are the very classes for whom the penny serial was intended. Despite the subject matter, the tone throughout the story is mostly humorous as Coates describes Jack's adventures in true sensational fashion, complete with daring action sequences, bumbling side-characters, and entertaining dialogue.

One of the few times the narrative adopts a more serious tenor is when Spring-Heeled Jack accidentally frightens a man to death. The man is a thief who intends to store his loot in a graveyard vault, and when Jack pretends to be a ghost to scare the criminal out of his misbehaviour, the man succumbs to his terror and collapses. Spring-Heeled Jack at first believes the man has only fainted: upon realising he has died from fright, Jack expresses deep regret and exclaims ". . . though he deserves his fate, I cannot help feeling more like a murderer than an executioner" (50). The distinction between murderer and executioner emphasises

another fine line used by Coates to distinguish Jack from other scoundrels; although he does not balk from killing someone whom he feels deserves it, he regrets when his actions accidentally cause a death of a minor-level criminal. After a few paragraphs of lamentation at this unintended consequence of his actions, Jack (escaping the authorities once again) happens upon Ellen Folder, a poor seamstress whose work had been stolen by the criminal Jack inadvertently killed. Despondent at the loss of her hard work and the probable accusations of theft from her clients, the woman decides to kill herself by jumping into the Thames.

Spring-Heeled Jack, upon learning of her plans for suicide, runs after Ellen and exclaims, "do not seek to avoid me. I assure you I am your friend" (56). Unfortunately, his terrifying reputation precedes him and stymies his attempts to save her, as she does not believe his protestations. Although Jack eventually rescues her, Ellen is initially able to evade his pursuit and jump into the river when a man on the street delays Jack by fighting him while declaring that "every man, woman and child in London have cause to dread your being at liberty" (57). In this manner, Jack must contend with the consequences of his past actions and face the difficulties of inspiring confidence in those whom he has previously terrorised. Aside from the dramatic narrative this plot inspires, the episode again underlines the penny serial's efforts to change the public's perception of this character through his revival in the fictional realm. Rather than presenting Spring-Heeled Jack as a figure to vilify, Coates places readers in the position of sympathising with Jack and his efforts to become more than "the terror of London."

Jack's struggle comes full circle in the final issue of the serial when he has an ultimate confrontation with the deviant Grasper on the rooftop of Grasper's home. As Jack tries to apprehend the villain and prevent him from once again accosting Jane, Grasper loses his balance and falls to his death (576). As in the first episodes of the narrative, Jack inadvertently triggers the death of a criminal, and despite his attempts to save the antagonists in both instances, they perish in his pursuit of justice. The parallelism of the storylines makes clear that Coates wants to create sensational stories of criminality and death to entertain audiences and still maintain a noble morality for the vigilante Jack. In doing so, other characters fill the villainous role that the original Spring-Heeled Jack played in newspaper reports, enabling Jack to complete his metamorphosis into an antiheroic protagonist with which readers can identify and eagerly follow. Indeed, in his study of the figure, Bell evocatively describes Jack as a "misunderstood costumed vigilante," a character that "resonated with the notion of the rebellious individual in a society increasingly bound by legislation and its enforcement agencies" (2012: 10, 60). Readers could use Spring-Heeled Jack to "vicariously live out their fantasies of violence and rebellion," while still feeling as though they were following the escapades of a principled individual (224).

There were plenty of other penny dreadfuls throughout the nineteenth century that promoted criminal or villainous men, from Dick Turpin to Sweeney Todd. Spring-Heeled Jack was not unique in being a character on the wrong side of the law. These other figures fit the criteria for sensational fiction well, with authors able to craft thrilling storylines and adventures based upon the characters' antics. Yet, as Mackley notes, one of the distinguishing factors of Spring-Heeled Jack is that he functions as "an example of multiple identities" in one figure: he exhibits a "dualism within" that generates narrative tension (2021: 53). What he does as Jack he would be unable to do "in an undisguised form," and he thus requires the "alter ego as a means of atoning for past deeds," among other purposes (53). His dualism and multifaceted nature positioned him as a figure particularly well-suited to transformation from one genre to another and who could metamorphose from villain of the newspapers' shocking articles to antihero of the penny dreadfuls' audacious tales.

The character's transfiguration continued along similar lines in subsequent penny dreadfuls, although none reached the popular heights of the original serialisation. Colin Henry Hazlewood's 1867-1868 story, *Spring-heel'd Jack, The Terror of London: A Romance of the Nineteenth Century*, includes a supernatural aspect in that its allusions to ghosts and demons, but Jack himself is devoid of any of the paranormal trappings found in his earliest newspaper references. His central depiction remains that of a mysterious personality who is feared by society as a supernatural figure but is "actually a man in a costume with spring-powered boots" (Bell 2012: 178). This iteration also continued the 1863 narrative's reinvention of the character as a "misunderstood hero rather than a villain" (178-79). As opposed to being a supernatural shapeshifter or dishonourable accoster, he became a "costumed vigilante" whose "disdain for the law" brought to mind Robin Hood and other roguish heroes (179).

Jack's story would once again be serialised a decade later, this time in the *Boy's Standard*. Purported to be a summarisation of the original Spring-Heeled Jack's diary, this account ran from 1878-1879 and employed the common Victorian literary convention of creating a narrative framework through a character's journal entries. Though it contained violence, it focused on "intrigue rather than gore," thus moving slightly away from the sensational mode (Bell 2012: 179). While the serialisations of the previous decade thrust readers into the action of an already established Spring-Heeled Jack whose true identity would remain undetermined, this account contained the first fictional origin story of the character – one which was then reprinted in 1885 (Mackley 2021: 47). These later publications name him as Jack Dacre, a son of aristocrats whose tragic past includes surviving a shipwreck in which his parents perished, and, in so doing, further the process of rehabilitation of Jack from wicked criminal to humanised hero with understandable motivations.

Another serialised origin story, entitled (as many of these narratives were) *Spring-Heeled Jack, the Terror of London*, was published in 1886. In this version, Jack plays a supporting role to the young hero, Ralph Ashton, attempting to assert his right of inheritance from a corrupt aristocratic relative. Spring-Heeled Jack is once again an antiheroic protagonist, though his part in the narrative is minimised, and his attire both recalls his first descriptions in the 1830s and resembles an almost graphic-novelesque costume. When clothed as his alter ego, Jack appears as a creature with "a bat-like body, in red tight-fitting garments, with wide wings, and a devil's face, sulphurous flame and smoke issuing from his mouth" (Mackley 2021: 47-48). As well as referencing the early newspaper reports, Mackley observes that this 1886 serial also continues the 1863 narrative's choice to follow "two women in distress who are protected by Spring-heeled Jack," albeit in a secondhand manner, as Jack defends the women through their association with Ashton (48).

After a ten-year lapse in fictional depictions of the character, these adaptations arose in part because the history of Spring-Heeled Jack had slowly recaptured the public consciousness to the extent that the character once again inspired copy-cat activities in the real world. These happenings were detailed by Beatrix Potter who, in a 1 March 1877 diary entry, mentioned how "a gang of young men calling themselves Spring-heeled Jacks have been going about in the dusk and frightening people" (qtd. Mackley 2021: 45). Others, dressed in costumes as varied as rubber suits, sheets, or sheepskins, continued to scare Londoners with behaviour inspired by Jack (46). The various forms in which these imitators embodied the figure recall the shapeshifting descriptions of his earliest reports in the 1830s before the London newspapers promoted the singular image of him as a cloaked and masked man with spring-powered boots.

With this resurgence and string of imitators, Spring-Heeled Jack's manifestations seemed to have come full circle at the half century mark of his first appearances. A retrospective

of the initial terrorisation published in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* in 1887 claimed that "for some months Jack created the greatest terror in London and its neighbourhood" from 1837 to 1838, but that it was currently suspected among authorities that "a number of young 'bloods' worked together to produce the appearances," as contemporary youths continued the legacy years later (Fleetwood 1887: 15). A similarly reflective article regarding Jack's early scares appeared during this time in an 1884 issue of *All the Year Round*. While noting the likelihood that Spring-Heeled Jack's attacks were most probably carried out by assorted imitators, the article reminded readers that a popular theory of the 1830s claimed that Jack was actually the dissolute Marquis of Waterford. This theory was ultimately disproved when "not a shadow of proof could be ever adduced in support" of it ("Spring-Heeled" 1884: 346), but the idea of Jack being a disguised aristocrat continued to be teased through several penny fictional portrayals, marking it as another one of the figure's transmedial qualities. The mid-to-late-1880s served as a liminal period in which Spring-Heeled Jack still appeared in some stories and news article retrospectives while his popularity continued to wane. Intriguingly, with this dwindling of public interest came a brief return to his villainous origins, not in the newspapers but in fictional narratives.

A good example of this reversion occurred in one of the only fictionalisations of Jack across the Atlantic in "Spring-Heel Jack, or, the Masked Mystery of the Tower," an 1885 story by the American author Thomas Hoyer Monstery. Published in *Beadle's New York Dime Library*, the narrative illustrates quite well the inclination of the time to use the figure as a classic sensationalised villain, in this instance one who wears armour and has long, scythe-shaped springs on his boots. Called "monster" fifty times in the twenty-nine page story, it is clear that any attempts at humanisation of the character have been discarded in favour of shaping him into a wicked foil for the hero.

The only effort Monstery makes at crafting a sympathetic veneer for Spring-Heeled Jack, who admits to having gone on his terrorising spree solely for "amusement," comes on the very last page of the story when he tells his adoptive brother that he refrained from killing him because "something told me . . . that I ought to be ashamed of myself for doing it" (Monstery 1885: 29). After this wan confession, Jack conveniently dies, thus leaving the hero and his intended free from his homicidal ways.[7] This reversion to earlier infamous depictions in the London newspapers of Jack as a scoundrel was not particularly well-received by readers, at least not well enough to warrant any similar stories, and the tale passed relatively quickly out of public consciousness. One might argue that part of this narrative's lack of popularity could be attributed to its publication in the United States, where Spring-Heeled Jack had not captured the general populace's attention as he had for decades in England.[8] Yet, even without a historical or folkloric frame of reference for the character, his reduction to stereotypical villain with a flimsy backstory certainly did nothing to create an interest in Spring-Heeled Jack or engender any connection with readers.

Transmedia characters "emerge in and between representations across media if audience members perceive multiple representations as describing the same entity," but such a

[7] Another similarity this story bears with earlier depictions of the character is Spring-Heeled Jack's alleged aristocratic identity. In this iteration, Jack is initially identified as the Duke of Norfolk, but he is ultimately revealed to be a "Romany" and not the legitimate heir to the estate, which passes to the hero and heroine after his death.

[8] Perhaps Monstery was simply ahead of his time, as some sightings of Spring-Heeled Jack in America made newspaper reports in the early-twentieth century (Mackley 2021: 54).

formulation means they are particularly dependent upon and susceptible to "the audience member's [or public's] ongoing interest in the character's life" (Haugtvedt 2022: 10). Unfortunately, Jack's ability to capture readers' imaginations had waned, and the rest of Jack's fictional trajectory in England continued in a similar vein of diminishing character development and public interest. From 1899-1901, "The Human Bat," a serial story inspired by Spring-Heeled Jack, with much artistic license, was published in *The Funny Wonder* (Mackley 2021: 51). In this narrative, Jack is a vampire known as Spring-Heeled Jack, or simply The Bat, and is the definitive villain with no redeeming qualities. The last major serialisation detailing Jack's exploits was written by Charlton Lea and published in 1904, but was discontinued after only twelve issues (50). The character's backstory is quite different in this narrative, and he appears as Bertram Wraydon, a British army lieutenant in the Napoleonic Wars who must fight his villainous half-brother for his inheritance.

By the last quarter of the century, Jack had undergone "a shift from being a figure of fear to a figure of fun," although he did retain "some vestigial power to prompt fear in local communities" toward the end of the century (Bell 2012: 41, 43). Jack's last real-world sighting occurred in Liverpool in 1904, the same year as his final serialisation. Back to his original antics, Jack was reported to have leapt across multiple rooftops while "hurling bricks and bottles" to the streets below (Mackley 2021: 49). What became of the original Spring-Heeled Jack (and his many mimics in the various cities of England) is a mystery, but as the nineteenth century drew to a close, he had fallen from public consciousness and popularity to such a degree that nobody cared enough about the figure to keep the mythologising alive.

During the course of the Victorian era, Spring-Heeled Jack vacillated between terroriser and "assaulter of women" to "an avenger of the vulnerable" and then back to an "evil criminal" by the turn of the twentieth century (Mackley 2021: 53). Such varied depictions of this character portray neither a clear-cut hero nor a villain, but rather an antihero who often found himself straddling a morally ambiguous line, and one whose public perception was greatly influenced by the media in which he appeared.

The transformation of Spring-Heeled Jack's public perception from nefarious fiend to defender of innocents can be partially attributed to the amount of time that had elapsed between his first appearance and later resurgence. Yet, the noticeable shift in his characterisation was also greatly influenced by the disparate forms of media in which he was depicted. Fear was often a driving force that helped seize newspaper readers' attention in the Victorian era, and so the early ostensibly nonfictional newspaper reports sensationalised his devilish nature and villainous behaviour in part to capture the public's attention and create an ongoing saga of terror to follow in the press. Conversely, when resurrected in fictional genres, authors and dramatists decided to give Spring-Heeled Jack a backstory, motivations, and somewhat of a moral compass to make him more appealing and sympathetic. In this manner, he was transformed from news story monster to a morally ambiguous figure that audiences might prefer as the protagonist of these visual and dramatic modes.

The creators of these stories thereby adapted their interpretations of this character to fit audiences' expectations of what they would encounter in each genre, be it news report, penny serial, comic ballet, or stage play. These different depictions across platforms illustrate just how significant the media mode in which he appeared (and attendant expectations of that platform) was in shaping readers' and viewers' awareness. Thus, the chimerical nature of Spring-Heeled Jack throughout the nineteenth century serves as an intriguing case study of the power of transmedia portrayals in the Victorian era to shape public perception.

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