Arresting Literary Criminals: Thackeray’s Campaign against the Newgate Fiction*

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I. Rise of Crime and the Newgate Fiction

The 1830s were a time of social, economic, and political change in Britain, and urban unrest and the rise of crime, especially murder cases, were a result of the destabilization of the times. Despite the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829, the lack of professionalism among police recruits made the system totally unworkable. Of the original 2,800 men, 2,238 were quickly dismissed, many for drunkenness on duty.

* The present research has been conducted by the Bisa Research Grant of Keimyung University in 2006.
1) Despite the urgent need for crime fighting, opposition to the creation of the modern police force was so strong that the introduction of a unified, centralized police force in Britain was delayed until mid-century. The major source of opposition to the police came not, as might be expected, from Chartists and the organized working-class, but from middle-class tax-payers, concerned about the expense of a national force, and from middle-class liberals who envisioned a threat to individual civil liberties. Although the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829 set up the first police force for the London area, the lack of professionalism among police recruits made the system totally unworkable. Of the original 2,800 men, 2,238 were quickly dismissed, many for drunkenness on duty.
decade following was "the golden age of gangsterdom in Britain" and "an era of uncontrolled crime and mob disorder" (Reith 3). Acts of murder were becoming so common that, on April 16, 1837, *Bell's Life* was moved to print the following editorial article. "It must strike every one with horror to observe how many murders have recently been committed, and murders of an atrocious kind. Have we all of a sudden become a bloodthirsty people?" (2). Crime, it seemed, was potentially everywhere and, as Beth Kalikoff points out in *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature*, the rise of the crime literature in this period was, in a way, the result of the popular fear of that crime--a "realization that one is never safe from the threat of crime, even of murder perpetrated by criminals who look--and maybe are--just like the rest of us" (59).

The General Instructions issued to the new Metropolitan force in 1829 stress that "it should be understood, at the outset, that the principal object to be attained is 'the prevention of crime'" (Radzinowicz 163). The police had concentrated on deterring crime until a detective force was added to the Metropolitan Police, and the new police developed specialization methods for tracking criminals in 1856. When prevention, not detection, became the chief weapon against crime, popular crime writing emerged as one strategy for separating society from criminality. Early nineteenth-century criminal literature in Britain was dominated by the *Newgate Calender*, a criminal biography, and, later in the 1830s, the Newgate novel, which continued the tradition of the *Newgate Calendar* in highlighting real crimes and criminals. "If these accounts were allowed to be printed and circulated," Michel Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish*, "it was because they were expected to have the effect of an ideological control" (67). The display of the criminals--their crimes, their final confessions, their dying words, and particularly their dead bodies at the gallows--lets the world know what happens to

Policemen were unfamiliar and unwelcome sights in London and rarely seen outside that city (Reiner 15-7).