

“Quite another Vein of Wickedness” Making Sense of Highway Robbery in Defoe’s *Colonel Jack*

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Abstract In early 1720s London highway or street robbery, especially by ‘gangs’, was highly topical; for some decades it had been a cause of much anxiety, and had recently been the target of increasingly harsh legislation. Yet the vast literature that “accompanied and stimulated” that legislation has been described by Robert Shoemaker as deeply ambivalent, swinging between negative images of ruthless brutes and positive images of polite gentlemen highwaymen. In Daniel Defoe’s *Colonel Jack* (1722) the protagonist’s thieving career follows a rising curve of violence, ‘progressing’ from picking merchants’ pockets and compounding to mugging old gentlemen and ambushing apprentices. Jack and his tutor/companion Will then fall into “quite another Vein of Wickedness” by getting in with a gang of footpads and burglars, a promotion Will promises, will make them “all Gentlemen together”. This essay suggests that we read the robbery episodes in this novel as an attempt to “make sense of” such violent crime and its conflicting cultural representations, especially as they relate to the gentlemanly aspirations which are a dominant motif in this novel.

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1 Deepening Ambivalence

Introducing their recent, much-needed edition of Defoe’s *Colonel Jack*,¹ Gabriel Cervantes and Geoffrey Sill attribute critical neglect of this novel to its reputation as a fiction of historical rather than literary interest (Cervantes & Sill 2016, 12). Against this “narrow view”, they make a case for seeing literary merit in its abiding interest in distortions of perception, imperfect knowledge, and the provisional and often unstable language used to name and make sense of the world (14). This is not to deny that the novel “tells us something significant about English life at the turn of the eighteenth century”, but that significant something lies less in its

1 Samuel Holt Monk’s edition of 1965 has been out of print since 1989.

many “verifiable historical details” than in “the confusing, contingent, and sometimes flimsily constructed beliefs, assumptions, and inaccuracies of perception and judgment often bundled together with rather than cordoned off from empirical knowledge” (15).²

These acute observations, applicable in part also to *Moll Flanders*, provide the starting point for Cervantes’ and Sill’s reading of the novel as a whole. This essay discusses only one small set of the tools Defoe uses in order to “name and make sense of the world”, in particular with the world of highway robbery entered by Colonel Jack in the second phase of his thieving career.

To understand this phase we need to see that it differs from the first – that of ‘private stealing’, i.e. thefts carried out without the victim’s knowledge – in ways I believe to have been crucial for Defoe and his early readers.³ After the death of his foster nurse Jack makes a living by running errands and guarding shops from thieves (like Moll!), then is taught by an expert “diver” how to steal pocket-books from City merchants and bankers. Picking pockets had long been a capital offence, though it was rarely prosecuted for a number of reasons, among which reluctance on the part of victims to risk hanging someone – often a woman or a child – for an offence commonly (though not in law) perceived as relatively petty and often the fault of the victim (Beattie 1986, 180-1). As in Defoe’s first criminal novel, the pick-pocketing anecdotes in *Colonel Jack* highlight the skills needed to execute such thefts and escape from the scene of the crime, and offer readers object lessons on the simple precautions they should take in order to defend themselves from such predators.

No easy advice could be offered potential victims of robbery, defined by Edward Coke in 1634 as “a felony in Common law committed by a violent assault, upon the person of another, by putting him in fear, and taking from his person his money or other goods” (quoted in Spraggs 2001, epigraph). Well-to-do travellers could and did arm themselves or their servants, perhaps hire bodyguards; but many victims were labourers and servants walking to and from work in the dusk and early morning, and would not have had the means to protect themselves at their disposal. Many Londoners, including women, did react valiantly against muggers, and passers-by would usually respond to cries for help; but on lonely roads and in deserted alleys there might be no-one to hear.

2 I would argue that those “verifiable historical details” have an important rhetorical function in shoring up “confusing, contingent, and sometimes flimsily constructed beliefs”. On the use of concrete particulars to orientate interpretation, see Marta Bardotti’s excellent study (1990) of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in March 1722 just few months after *Moll Flanders* and before *Colonel Jack*; see especially 157-65.

3 This distinction has not, it seems to me, been sufficiently noticed. McBurney (1962), for instance, treats the whole of Jack’s thieving career as a continuum.

Night-watchmen were few and far between on the streets of London, at least until payment, beats and watch-houses were organised well into the eighteenth century (cf. Beattie 2001, ch. 4). As with all property crime, the main response of post-Glorious Revolution government to what was perceived as a rising tide of robbery was to resort to deterrence in the form of capital punishment. One of the earliest to be removed from benefit of clergy (1531), robbing on the King's highway was in 1692 given a key place in the new statutory reward system aimed at encouraging prosecutors and informers, becoming the first felony for which huge, permanent incentives were offered for apprehending and convicting. Successful prosecutors could earn £40 for every robber convicted,⁴ and witnesses who 'discovered' accomplices qualified for pardons. In 1706 the same conditions were extended to cover housebreaking and burglary, two forms of theft also associated with violence, and often with the same perpetrators. With the coming of peace in 1713, and subsequent demobilisation of many thousands of soldiers and sailors, the incidence of these crimes – or rather the frequency of Old Bailey prosecutions – rose from less than eighteen per year to over forty (Pocklington 1997, quoted by Beattie 2004, 372). Government reacted by stiffening the relevant legislation with two measures aimed specifically at robbers working in and around the capital. The Second Transportation Act of 1719 included a clause stipulating that *all* the streets of London – i.e. including lanes and courts – were to be considered highways under the statute of 1692; and in January 1720 a royal proclamation added a massive £100 over and above the statutory £40 for convicting a robber committing an offence within a five-mile radius of Charing Cross (Beattie 2001, 378).

The metropolitan focus of these measures was reinforced by linguistic and cultural innovations. Robert Shoemaker (2006, 386) has traced the first appearance in print of the expression "street robber" to the July 1722 issue of the *Daily Journal*, where an article spoke – misleadingly – of a "gang" of "fifteen persons whose sole business is to rob about the streets of London".⁵ Four years later *A Brief Historical Account of the lives of the Six Notorious Street Robbers Executed at Kingston* (1726) was still describing the street robber as a new type of criminal, one distinguished from others in that he (those accused of robbery were mostly male) combined

4 As Robert Hume states (2014, 492), it is impossible to say what this sum would be equivalent to in today's money, but over the period 1660-1740 £40 would probably have represented the best part of a year's income for more than 90% of the population; Hay & Rogers 1997, 19 (cited by Hume 2014, 496).

5 Misleadingly because robbers usually did not specialise in any one type of crime, method or territory, and rather than forming large, cohesive membership tended to work in loosely linked networks of whom few men would participate in any given robbery (Beattie 2001, 373; Shoemaker 2006, 386).

murdering with theft; the author, until quite recently thought to be Defoe, stated – erroneously – that street robbers never used horses or operated in fields or on open roads.⁶

The 1720s saw a plethora of pamphlets on street robbery and how to deal with it, of which two were by Defoe and others were until recently attributed to him. They constitute a small part of the vast literature which accompanied and stimulated the introduction and enforcement of the legal measures of 1719-1720. The language used to “name and make sense of” what many saw as a new curse on a blessed city (Sill 1976, 77) was commonly as “provisional and unstable”, and run through with “assumptions [...] inaccuracies of perception and judgment” as that Cervantes and Sill find in Defoe’s fictions (2016, 14).⁷ The same is true of genres purporting to inform the public about specific crimes. Reporters devoted disproportionate attention to violent theft as compared to far more common non-violent larcenies, such as pick-pocketing and shop-lifting. The semi-official *Old Bailey Proceedings* was obliged to report all trials and did so fairly soberly, but gave little space to prosecutions ending in acquittal and a great deal to sensational crimes (Shoemaker 2008, 567). The *Ordinary’s Accounts*, published by the chaplains of Newgate on each hanging day, gave the biographies and confessions only of the few condemned who actually went to the gallows, thus offering a biased sample of London criminals. Newspapers, free to choose stories that would sell, favoured the dramatic and scurrilous over the petty and mundane. In the mid century (1723-1765) robberies amounted to only 6.8% of all Old Bailey prosecutions, but accounted for 44.2% of newspaper crime reports (Shoemaker 2006, 383). These reports tended to label robbers “rogues, ruffians, and villains” and include graphic descriptions of alleged brutalities (384). The early 1720s, years that saw several gangs of robber/burglars brought to the Old Bailey by professional thief-takers eager for rewards and accomplices trying to save their necks, produced some lurid accounts. In April 1722 the *Weekly*

6 Furbank and Owens (1994, 141) discount the evidence for Defoe’s authorship of *Six Notorious Street Robbers*, and (146) follow Clinton S. Bond (1971) in de-attributing *Street Robberies Consider’d [...] Written by a Converted Thief* [1728]; they also doubt Defoe’s authorship of *An Effectual Scheme to the Immediate Preventing of Street Robberies* (1731 [for 1730]). On these, as well as the ‘Andrew Moreton’ pamphlets *Augusta Triumphans* (1728) and *Second Thoughts are Best* (1728), in both of which Defoe proposes schemes for dealing with urban crime, see Sill 1976.

7 Denominations for robbers can be very confusing. ‘Highwayman’ is often used to mean a horseman working heaths and roads leading into and out of London, as opposed to a robber working city streets on foot. In law, however, there was no distinction between the mounted and unmounted, and as we have seen, from 1719 even the narrowest of London alleys counted as a highway. Confusions like these are exacerbated by supposed social distinctions of rank which may have held good for an earlier period but by our period had become slippery or changed meaning altogether (Spraggs 2001, ch. 14).

Journal reported that, after an attack by three of the Hawkins gang on a stage-coach, a pedlar woman “cried out to the people that she knew the rogues” at which “they turned back and cut her tongue out” (quoted in Beattie 2001, 152); one witness claimed that they had thrown the tongue over the hedge (*The Old Bailey Proceedings*, OA17220521 [2016-03-31]). Even Ralph Wilson, a member of the gang who had testified to the robberies, supported the Hawkins’s denials of brutality and complained that he himself had been falsely accused of rape and cruelty (quoted in Shoemaker 2006, 384).

So far we have met only with negative images of robbers, but as Shoemaker writes, “public perceptions of robbery had always been divided between two long standing traditions”, one which “decried his use of threatened or actual violence”, while the other “celebrated the highwayman’s courageous and entertaining exploits” (2008, 381-2; cf. also Faller 1987, ch. 8). Gillian Spraggs (2001) has traced the evolution of the second of these traditions from medieval celebration of the courageous and aggressive rebel motivated by injustice through the rise in the sixteenth century of the stereotype of the destitute gentleman driven to use his military training and horsemanship to restore his fortunes by methods thought more honourable, and indeed more English, than stealing covertly or – God forbid – begging or working (106-7, 260-1). By the seventeenth century, the script of the heroic highwayman required that he be courteous and avoid aggressive violence; by the eighteenth gentle birth was no longer mandatory, but polite and humane behaviour to victims had become hallmarks (183-5). Andrea McKenzie (2007, 105) sees the 1720s as marking “an apogee of the highwayman or street robber, not only as a social critic, but also as a celebrity in his own right”. The dashing James Carrick, whom Defoe could have seen die at Tyrburn in July 1722, McKenzie cites as

the quintessential game highwayman, spending his last minutes smiling, cracking jokes, taking snuff, and assuming ‘genteel airs in fixing the Rope aright around his Neck’. (105)

Shoemaker has shown systematically how, even as the perceived growth of crime and the publicising of its more sensational manifestations reinforced the negative image of the highway robber in early Georgian London, “prevailing cultural ideals such as civility, politeness and the increasingly loose definition of gentility” were exploited by robbers themselves, as well as by journalists, novelists and dramatists.⁸ As a consequence, he argues, the traditional ambivalence concerning robbers deepened into a dichotomy:

⁸ The best known theatrical robber with pretensions to gentility is, of course, Macheath, protagonist of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728). Among actual examples, Maclaime, “the gentleman highwayman” who held up Horace Walpole in Hyde Park, was lionised as

“Between the 1720s and the middle of the century competing discourses crystallized into two contrasting images: the violent street robber, and the polite gentleman highwayman”.

Competing and contrasting, but not always neatly separated. On trial at the Old Bailey in May 1722, John Hawkins and his accomplice, George Simpson, the same two who had been accused of cutting out the old woman’s tongue, impressed the *Weekly Journal* as “persons of genteel and extraordinary behaviour” (Shoemaker 2008, 391). Awaiting his execution in Newgate, Hawkins admitted to over twenty robberies, but claimed that “he never dealt in Barbarous Actions” (*The Old Bailey Proceedings*, OA17220521; [2016-03-31]). A few months earlier James Shaw, though confessing to a “vast Number” of assaults and soon to die for robbery and murder, claimed “that in all his Robberies he never us’d Violence to any Man”, and piously told the chaplain that he was:

firmly of Opinion, that, as it is more sinful to rob a poor Man or the Church of God, so it was less sinful to rob those who would have spent the Money taken in Gaiety and Luxury, or those who perhaps had unjustly acquired it by Gaming. (OA17220208; [2016-03-31])

Throughout 1722 Defoe would have been reading and talking about men like Hughs, Hawkins, Shaw and their accomplices, as would many of his own early readers. By the spring and summer he may also have already been planning to follow up the success of his story of a status-conscious older woman pick-pocket and shop-lifter with a fictional biography of a young man obsessed with gentility, one who for a period of his youth becomes materially involved in highway robbery, and ideologically entangled in the ambivalences that beset representations of this very topical “Vein of Wickedness”. The robbery episodes in *Colonel Jack* may be read as, among other things, an attempt to sort out that tangle and make sense of a new and perplexing feature of London life.

2 From Picking Pockets to Street Robbery

That *Colonel Jack* is an untidy and incoherent work of fiction is a complaint voiced by critics from Coleridge to Watt. Since the hold of organicism has slackened, critics have felt less obliged to project onto Defoe expectations formed by classical realism, and more dynamic ways of reading have helped us see in his inconsistencies “*segni di una scrittura in movimento*,”

“The Ladies Hero” for his supposed gallantry and fine manners (cf. Hitchcock & Shoemaker 2006, 170-80).

di un modo di narrare che 'si fa' man mano che procede" (Sertoli 1998, 65). Lincoln Faller (1993), taking a slightly different but no less dynamic approach, focuses on the many confused and confusing "comparisons and contrasts [...], parallelisms and analogies which riddle the text". Not only is it "hard to say what many of these analogies mean",

they cut across and threaten to perforate the cognitive schemes by which Jack's narrative might otherwise be ordered. The relationships they indicate have a double effect, binding the text together and disrupting it at another. (1993, 171)

The comparison/contrast which binds and disrupts the two early thieving phases in Colonel Jack's life pairs him with his variously denominated "tutor", "guide", "companion" and "brother", initially named Robin, soon renamed Will.⁹ During their pick-pocketing phase their relationship is a simple one of leader and led, with the younger boy slavishly admiring the older for his skill in executing thefts and getting away successfully:

THIS was a most exquisite Fellow for a Thief, for he had the greatest Dexterity at Conveying any thing away; that he scarce ever pitch'd upon any thing in his Eye, but he carried it off with his Hands, and never that I know of, miss'd his Aim, or was catch'd in the Fact (98-9).¹⁰

Jack is a beginner in the execution of such "tricks", and even more so, in Will's eyes, in his childish wish to restore to their owners large bills and credit notes they would be unable to turn into cash (78-9, 86). Yet it is precisely the former's insistence that the value of these bills not be lost that lead the pair to devise a clever way of selling them back to their owners,¹¹ and in so doing precociously put to use Jack's "entrepreneurial talent [...], his great talent [...] in negotiating deals" (Faller 1993, 193).

Once Will and Jack move on to street robbery, however, this gift drops from narrative view; we hear no more of marketing the booty and all analogy between crime and trade disappears. The change to open and aggressive methods is associated with their beginning to "look higher" (108), but the narrative does not suggest that robbery brings bigger profits or greater glory than picking pockets. The boys' first mugging takes place

⁹ The name change illustrates Sertoli's notion of "writing on the move", but the "ripenamento" seems appropriate given Will's ability to impose his 'will' on the younger lad.

¹⁰ All references to the text of *Colonel Jack* [1722] are to the 2016 edition by Cervantes and Sill.

¹¹ Though illegal, compounding was a practice appreciated by many a victim of theft as a service that minimized damage to themselves while allowing the thief to earn some profit (cf. Beattie 2001, 228).

in Smithfield meat market, where while “strouling about” one Friday they notice “an antient Country Gentleman” who has just been paid for a sale of large bullocks. When he is over-taken by a fit of coughing “ready to be strangl’d”, Will makes an “artificial stumble” so that “[t]he violence of the blow beat the old Gentleman quite down”; Jack runs to get hold of his Bag of Money “gave it a quick snatch, pulled it clean away, and run like the Wind” (109). Sharp observation, quick-wittedness, a clean execution, and a speedy getaway: the reader may participate in the excitement of the hit and flight, yet be perplexed by the use of force by two healthy young men against a sick old one. Unlike the many who, like Sarah Reed and Hester Pepper, resisted their attackers and called for help, this frail old farmer is in no condition to react:

frighted with the fall, and his Breath so stopp’d with his Cough, that he could not recover himself to speak till some time, during which, nimble Will was got up again and walk’d off; nor could he call out stop Thief, or tell any Body he had lost any thing for a good while; but Coughing vehemently, and looking red till he was almost black in the Face, he cry’d the Ro--- Hegh, Hegh, Hegh, the Rogues Hegh, have got Hegh, Hegh, Hegh, Hegh, Hegh, then he would get a little Breath, and at it again the Rogue--- Hegh, Hegh, and after a great many Heghs, and Rogues he brought it out, have got away my Bag of Money. (109)

As Hal Gladfelder (2001, 106) writes, “The comedy of such an anecdote depends on the suspension of sympathy”; we can only be amused at the onomatopoeic rendering of the old man’s coughing fit and share in Jack’s jeering at the sight of his congested face if we surrender to “that strain of blunt, rather unfeeling laughter which runs through canting books and the picaresque”. It is by no means clear whether Defoe is inviting us to make that surrender.

The next episode is not much easier to read. The boys’ second victim is a “young Fellow” who might have given them more trouble if they had attacked him in daylight and in a busy street. But for “such Work as we had to do” (111) they choose darkness and seclusion. It is dusk when, in a half-enclosed court off Lombard Street, Jack and Will notice a woollen-drapeer’s apprentice paying in money at a goldsmith’s shop. They wait until he comes out with “still a pretty large Bag under his arm”, by which time it is “Very Dark”.

[Will] flies at the young Man, and Gives him such a violent Thrust, that push’d him forward with too great a force for him to stand, and as he strove to recover, the Threshold took his feet, and he fell forward into the other part of the Court, as if he had flown in the Air. [...] I stood ready, and presently felt out the Bag of Money, which I heard fall, for it

flew out of his Hand, he having his Life to save, not his Money: I went forward with the Money, and Will that threw him down, finding I had it, ran backward. (110)

As with the Smithfield mugging, this narrative bristles with active verbs of thrusting, pushing, striving, falling, throwing and running, verbs which involve the reader in hope for their success. Yet the epithet 'poor' demands sympathy for the apprentice, and the specification that he had "his Life to save" implies that the outcome could have been fatal for him.

Defoe would not have needed to spell out to his early readers how victims could suffer serious injury during a robbery. On hearing that he had "reported to his Master [...] that he was knock'd down", Jack insists that this "was not true, for neither Will, or I, had any Stick in our Hands" (110). Early eighteenth-century readers would have recognised here a reference to a weapon more commonly used than swords or pistols, especially by those who robbed on foot. In September 1722, for instance, they could have read about how, at ten o'clock on the night of the previous 17 July, Jane Young was thrown down in a street just off the Haymarket by Arthur Hughs, that he cut off her pocket, threw it to one of his four comrades and then "punched her on the Breast with a short Stick which he carried in his Sleeve" (*The Old Bailey Proceedings*, t17220907-40; [2016-03-31]). Sticks could be innocent things; at his trial Hughs claimed he carried it "to play Trap ball". In gaol, however, he confessed to the Ordinary that

the Stick he carry'd in his Sleeve on those Occasions, was with intent to Stun those they robb'd, and serv'd better than a Pistol, because it made no Noise. (OA17220924; [2016-03-31])

Sticks may have been meant only to stun, but blows to the head could of course kill. James Shaw, whom we have already met, was convicted of murdering Philip Potts

by giving him one mortal Bruise on the Forehead, near the Left Eye, with a wooden Staff, on the 24th of June last, of which mortal Bruise he languish'd till the 26th of the same Month, and then died. (t17220112-14; [2016-03-31])

The staff had in this case been used to knock the victim off his horse as – according to Shaw himself – was usual in attacking mounted travellers from the ground. His explanation of his *modus operandi* would have confirmed the widespread view that robberies committed on foot involved greater brutality than those committed on horseback. Shaw told the Ordinary of Newgate that

he often robb'd on Horseback on Hamstead-Heath, Finchly-Common, & c. and often on Foot, but that the most Cruel and Savage, was the way of Robbing on Foot, Murther being most commonly committed, they having no other method on Foot of escaping from a Horseman, but by striking him down from his Horse, and then either Binding or else Disabling his Body. (OA17220208; [3016-03-31])

In denying that either he or Will carried a stick, Jack is surely trying to dissociate himself and his partner from the likes of Hughs and Shaw, but paradoxically draws attention to affinities between them. Defoe now begins to multiply those affinities by having Will join, and then drag Jack into, a network very much of akin to that of which James Shaw was a member.

3 A Wretched Gang of Fellows

After the Lombard Street job and several vaguely indicated "Enterprises, some of one kind some of another", Jack announces a turning point in Will's life which will turn out to be one in his own life too:

My Companion Will, who was now grown a Man, and encourag'd by these Advantages fell into quite another Vein of Wickedness getting acquainted with a wretched Gang of Fellows that turn'd their Hands to every Thing that was vile. (111)

The word "Gang" would have rung alarm bells with readers alert to the threat of what, according to recent press reports, were growing numbers of tightly-organised bands of vicious thieves (Wales 2000, 71). In collocating "Gang" with "wretched", and their practices with "every Thing that was vile", Defoe speaks through the prosecutorial idiom of the retrospective narrator, but then picks up again the naïve one of Jack the junior thief:

Will was a lusty strong Fellow, and withal very bold and daring, would Fight any Body, and venture upon any thing, and I found he began to be above the mean Rank of a poor Pick-pocket. (111)

This glowing description bestows on Will the manly attributes celebrated in the traditional cult of the courageous, aggressive robber (Spraggs 2001, 106). It is not Jack's first adulatory description, but new is the rueful contrast with "the mean Rank of a poor Pick-pocket" Jack sees himself as occupying. As Stephen Gregg has shown (2009, ch. 6), later in the novel Jack will play the subaltern gender roles of cuckolded husband (twice) and runaway Jacobite rebel. Here we see him failing to measure up to another model of manliness. The figure he cuts in boasting to Will of

his recent “pretty good Purchase[s]” in the “old Trade” may not be very prepossessing: he has picked a young woman’s pocket of eleven guineas, and “neatly” relieved a country girl just off the stage coach of £8 17s. Will scoffs condescendingly, then offers a seductive alternative:

I always said you were a lucky Boy, Col. Jack, says he, but come you are grown almost a Man now, and you shall not always play at Push-pin, I am got into better Business I assure you, and you shall come into it too, I’ll bring you into a brave Gang Jack, says he, where you shall see we shall be all Gentlemen. (112)

“[Y]ou shall come [...], I’ll bring you into a brave Gang”, Will promises. As a boy Jack had sorely resented his brother the Major’s excluding him from his “Society” of pick-pockets, “whereby I might have been made as happy as he” (74). The homosocial happiness now offered confers companionship but also adulthood, bravery, and superior social rank.¹²

In an evident effort to establish a serious, moral perspective on these allurements, Defoe once again switches idiom, reformulating Will’s tempting proposal in condemnatory terms:

THEN he told me the Trade it self in short, which was with a Set of Fellows, that had two of the most desperate Works upon their Hands that belong’d to the whole Art of Thieving; that is to say, in the Evening they were Footpads, and in the Night they were Housebreakers. (112)

These are the words of an external, older narrator, much removed from the mindset of his young protagonist, who in story time goes along with the gang “without any hesitation” (112). But, even taking into account his naivety, why does he do so? Jack’s retrospectively offered excuse for so doing opens up the contradictions in the positive gentleman-robber stereotype which, I would argue, Defoe is here trying to dismantle. While claiming that lack of religious instruction in youth had left him vulnerable to the persuasive power of Will’s “many plausible Stories” and talk of “great things”, Jack does not claim that such talk had appealed to his “strange original Notion [...] of my being a Gentleman”. Indeed it had been the “secret influence” of that very notion that had “kept me from [...] Raking and Vice, and in short, from the general Wickedness of rest of my Companions”. It had stopped him swearing, it appears from the narrative digression that follows, but not – we might notice – from picking

12 For a useful discussion of early modern “construction of manhood” and the correlation with social standing, cf. Foyster (1999, ch. 1).

pockets, mugging and now joining a gang of footpads and housebreakers. This must count as one of the many congruities, an incongruity Jack valiantly tries to sort out in an inconclusive reflection on the semantics of thieving and gentility:

Will it seems understood that Word in a quite different manner from me; for his Gentleman was nothing more or less than a Gentleman thief, a Villain of a higher Degree than a Pick-pocket; and one that might do something more Wicked, and better Entitling him to the Gallows, than could be done in our way. But the Gentleman that I had my Eye on, was another thing quite, tho' I could not really tell how to describe it either.¹³

Jack will never learn how to describe clearly “the Gentleman I had my Eye on”, a problem McBurney (1962, 325) long ago identified as the “dominant motif” of the novel, and which David Blewett (1979) thoroughly explored in the context of Jacobitism. In this, the context of crime and punishment, Defoe has Jack judge the “Gentleman thief” a greater “Villain”, potentially “more Wicked” and more deserving of the gallows than a pick-pocket. In so doing he gives voice to the cultural intolerance of violence in all its forms which to grow throughout the eighteenth-century society, affecting attitudes to duelling, to public insult, to rioting, and indeed to capital punishment (cf. Hitchcock & Shoemaker 2006, 43, 105, 237) – but which had not yet in the 1720s been embodied in the English penal system, which classified thefts minutely but prescribed death for all convicted felons, from pick-pockets to murderers. He also sets himself more clearly than he had hitherto against the glamourization of street robbers we have noticed above.

This position is consolidated in the series of anecdotes that follow. The long night of miscellaneous mayhem in which Jack now joins Will and two other gang members (114-8) completes what Gladfelder (2001, 105) calls the novel’s “catalogue of the varieties of street robbery”. Most of Defoe’s early readers would have found somewhere in it a victim with whom to identify, or recognised a part of the metropolis they knew and frequented. Those attacked include men and women of all ages and from all walks of life: professional, labouring, commercial and leisured,¹⁴ while the territory of rapine, so far confined to the City, is now extended right across London

¹³ Here Jack makes one signifier cover two opposed signified, confirming Faller’s comment that *Colonel Jack* “fits together better as a collection of signifiers than of signifieds” (1993, 171-2).

¹⁴ In this Defoe’s robbers differ from vehicles for social satire described by McKenzie (2007, 96): “semi-fictionalized seventeenth century highwaymen typically robbed lawyers, quack doctors, moneylenders and crooked tradesman, declaiming at length against their perfidy and hypocrisy, and forcing them to give up their ill-gotten gains”.

and its suburbs. On the road from Kentish Town a lone foot traveller strikes with his cane at Will, but is wrestled to the ground, forced to beg for his life and left tied up by the side of the road. A doctor and apothecary in a coach yield their "considerable fees", watches and silver surgical instruments without resisting. To Jack, the novice, falls the "easie [...] Bargain" of dealing with "a Couple of poor Women, one a kind of a Nurse, and the other a Maid-Servant". In the initial telling of this significant incident Jack begins with the kind of polite banter ascribed to gallant highwaymen (Spraggs 2001, 185), but quickly changes to a more threatening tone when the women scream:

hold, says I, make no Noise, unless you have a mind to force us to murder you whether we will or no, give me your Money presently, and make no Words, and we shan't hurt you. (116)

The maid hands over her shilling, the nurse her "Guinea, and a Shilling, crying heartily for her Money, and said, it was all she had left in the World; well we took it for all that". Jack's concluding phrase here, with its casual, phatic "well", mimes callous indifference to victims' poverty, reducing what is everything to her to a puny "it", and her distress to a mere "all that".

If Defoe here uses lack of feeling to disqualify robbers from being gentlemen in the newly emerging sense of the term, in the next few segments he further undermines their standing by casting doubt on their courage and determination. When they hold up a gentleman and a punk in a coach in Hyde Park the client hands over his money, but from "the Slut" they get an earful of abuse - and "not one Six-penny Piece". Their next potential prey, three gentlemen crossing Chelsea Fields, are "too strong for us to meddle with", for they have "hired three Men at Chelsea, two with Pitch-Forks, and the third, a Waterman, with a Boat-Hook-Staff to Guard them". Challenged by slightly superior numbers and a rudimentarily armed, makeshift bodyguard, the four robbers scuttle quickly off. They cut no better figure in a bungled attempt at burglary: they have bribed a footman to let them in to a house, but the "Rogue" has got drunk and been shut out.¹⁵ What turns out to be a farce, Jack reminds us, could have resulted in a massacre:

it was a happy Drunkenness to the Family, for it sav'd them from being robb'd, and perhaps murther'd, for they were a cursed bloody Crew.

¹⁵ On paranoia about servant theft and relevant legislation, cf. Beattie 2001, 37, 335-6. Specially feared were the kind featured in this anecdote and described in a pamphlet of 1708 as "Servants who belong to the Gang of House-Breakers [...] who oblige them to rob the House, or let some of the Gang in to do it" (336).

The night concludes, prosaically, with the gang breaking into a brew-house and wash-house to steal “a small Copper and about a Hundred weight of Pewter”, goods which next day they sell for half their value.

Financial particulars such as these might have struck Defoe's more attentive readers: Jack's share of the takings from this long night, £8 19s, is less than he had earned from either one of his recent, much-despised pick-pocketing ventures. But if Jack does “not seem so elevated at the Success of that Night's Ramble”, it is not for mercenary reasons. Somewhat belatedly, the taking of the poor nurse's last guinea fills his heart with “abhorrence [...] at the Cruelty of that Act”, and from this

there necessarily follow'd a little Distaste of the thing it self, and it came into my Head with a double force, that this was the High Road to the Devil. And that certainly this was not the Life of a Gentleman!

Cruel as an act, “the thing it self” has somehow turned distasteful, taste being one of the hallmarks of eighteenth-century gentility. The memory of this “very small crime” will return to torment Jack several times in the remainder of the novel, and is a key one in the process of Jack's reformation into man of feeling (Cervantes & Sill 2016, 44). I would add that the case of Mrs Smith, as she turns out to be called, is only the worst of a whole string of robberies consisting of assaults on or ‘putting in fear’ men and women, some rich, some poor, but all of them vulnerable in some way, as they go about London on their – more or less respectable – business, or sleep innocently in their beds.¹⁶ Though petty (from the gang's point of view) in terms of the profits they bring and relatively harmless in terms of the violence actually inflicted, the callousness and cowardice involved in all of them expose the emptiness of Will's claims to the gentlemanly status of robber gangs. The narration treats us to moments of semi-farce, others of pathos, others of potentially gory cruelty: of audacity in the face of danger, intelligence, elegance and excitement, none. Stories about robbers and burglars, should not, Defoe is perhaps telling us, be written in such a way as to entertain their readers or celebrate their protagonists.

4 The Life of a Gentleman?

Concluding the introduction to their edition of *Colonel Jack*, Cervantes and Sill (2016, 44) note that it is at this point in the novel that Defoe's protago-

¹⁶ In theory, the City of London was subject to curfew, and ‘night-walkers’ could be arrested by the watch. Physicians, nurses, servants and market folks were among those assumed to have legitimate reasons for being abroad at night (Beattie 2001, 170), so it is interesting that Defoe assigns several of the gang's victims to just those trades.

nist begins to draw “a firm boundary between his story and that of one of his various doubles”, namely Will. Nearing my own conclusion I turn to the confrontation in which the two young men heatedly debate the nature of their “Business” and its compatibility with gentlemanly status (118-9). “Mighty full” of their success so far, but eager for even greater things, Will proposes that they “buy a Couple of good Horses, and go further a Field [...] take the Highway like Gentlemen”. The change of method and territory he suggests would in the popular literature of the 1720s carry an assumption of the mounted highwayman’s superiority, either in the old-fashioned terms of birth or in the more modern sense of ethics and manners, to the mean and lowly footpad (Shoemaker 2008, 387; Beattie 1986, 151). Jack, however, fails to register any such distinction; rather he assimilates their past robberies (on foot) and to the proposed future ones (on horseback) into a single “way of living”:

I said to him, do you call this the Life of a Gentleman?

WHY, says Will, why not?

WHY, says I, was it like a Gentleman for me to take that Two and Twenty Shillings from a poor antient Woman, when she beg’d of me upon her Knees not to take it, and told me it was all she had in the World to buy her Bread for her self and a sick Child which she had at home.

Will’s reply, which also makes no distinction between highwaymen and footpads, is a chilling sketch of the cruelties any robber must commit if he is to save his neck:

YOU FOOL you, says Will, you will never be fit for our Business indeed [...] why, if you will be fit for Business, you must learn to fight when they resist, and cut their Throats when they submit; you must learn to stop their Breath, that they may beg and pray no more; what signifies pity? prethee, who will pity us when we come to the Old-Baily? I warrant you that whining old Woman that beg’d so heartily for her Two and Twenty Shillings would let you, or I beg upon our Knees, and would not save our Lives by not coming in for an Evidence against us; did you ever see any of them cry when they see Gentlemen go to the Gallows?

That highway robbers will inevitably “come to the Old-Baily” is taken for granted here, but without eye-witness evidence against them,¹⁷ it is implied, they can avoid being convicted and hanged. It follows, in Will’s reasoning, that all those at the scene, even the weakest and most submis-

17 On the importance of eye-witness evidence in law and in Defoe with special reference to *Colonel Jack*, cf. Clegg 1998.

sive, must be killed. Unlike the pick-pocket's prey, the robber's victims usually see their predators, and even if the robber escapes, he may be identified and testified against later. It is the very open and public nature of such robbery, Defoe shows us, that far from making it more honourable than pick-pocketing, of necessity makes it more brutal.

Will's "Gentlemen" will indeed "come to the Old-Baily", but if they are convicted it is ironically not on the evidence of any "whining old woman", but of one of themselves. In a thirteen-man attack on a suburban house a gardener loses his life, but since, in accordance with the self-help ethos of eighteenth-century law-enforcement the neighbours have organised armed resistance, "the Gentlemen Rogues were pursued, and being at London with the Booty, one of them was taken" (120). One is enough. Promised the favour of being saved from the gallows in exchange for his testimony, George, as the captured robber turns out to be called, informs on his "Companions, and Will among the rest, as the principal Party in the whole Undertaking". On his evidence Jack's tutor, partner and first double, will be caught, tried and hanged; so much, it seems, for the fine comradeship of the "brave Gang".¹⁸ Awaiting his trial in prison, Will admits to Jack that he had been "far out [...] when I told you to be a notorious Thief, was to live like a Gentleman" (131). The widow Mrs Smith, on the other hand, far from "coming in for an Evidence", refuses to recognise in Jack the man who had taken her last guinea and shilling (134).

5 Forming Ideas

If this were Jack's last word on the subject of highway robbery, we might conclude that Defoe had 'made sense' of the phenomenon for us, coming down clearly down on the side of the negative image and dismantling the celebratory tradition. *Colonel Jack* would be a more straightforward novel if Defoe had left us with Will voicing that callous realist creed as the novel's last embodiment of the street robber. But much later, having returned to London after many years abroad, Jack learns the fates of his two brothers, and tells us about them in terms that destabilize the disapproving attitude we have been invited to adopt. The Captain, "growing an eminent Highway man, had made his Exit at the Gallows, after a life of 14 Years most exquisite and successful Rogueries", while the Major had

¹⁸ Robber gangs were indeed vulnerable to betrayal from within, both because they were often so loosely-organised and inexpert, and because of the huge £140 rewards on offer to accomplices and thief-takers (Beattie 2001, 381). The *Proceedings and Ordinary's Accounts* for 1722 make especially grim reading. Thomas Bishop, John Hawkins, George Simpson, James Shaw and Paul Croney, along with another three of the latter's associates, were all impeached by accomplices.

follow'd the like wicked Trade; but was a Man of more Gallantry, and Generosity, and having committed innumerable Depredations upon Mankind, yet always had so much Dexterity, as to bring himself off. (227)

Though eventually taken, “no Fetters would hold him”; he breaks out of prison and escapes to France,

where he followed the same Trade, and that with so much Success, that he grew famous by the Name of Anthony, and had the honour with three of his Comrades, who he had Taught the English way of Robbing generously, as they called it, without Murthering or Wounding, or Ill using those they robb'd, I say, he had the Honour to be broke upon the Wheel at the Greve in Paris.

How are we to take the eminent Captain's “14 Years most exquisite and successful Rogueries eminence”, the Major's “English way of Robbing generously”, or the “Honour” of his atrocious death? If there is irony in this adoption of the jolly rogue idiom, it risks being misunderstood. We can only conclude that to the “remarkably diverse range of positive and negative images of robbery” disseminated in the literature of eighteenth-century London (Shoemaker 2006, 382), Defoe's second criminal novel contributes some remarkably incongruous examples. The “comparisons and contrasts” between Jack and Will, and then between Jack and his foster brothers, bind but also disrupt “the cognitive schemes by which Jack's narrative might otherwise be ordered” (Faller 1993, 171), while forcing us to continually revise and re-think the sense of the fictional – and indeed the real – world.

Cervantes and Sill (2016, 25-6), discussing the general tendency for racial differences which in Defoe's day “were still flexible and being negotiated”, to become “fixed over time”, suggest that “*Colonel Jack* is a novel that actively participated in the formation of ideas about what race meant”. We may also see it as a novel which participated in the formation of ideas about what crime meant, in making distinctions between “Vein[s] of Wickedness” which were as yet confused, but were increasingly informed by intolerance of violence in all its forms. If in *Colonel Jack* those ideas appear as “confusing, contingent, and sometimes flimsily constructed beliefs” (Cervantes & Sill 2006, 15), it is surely because these are “*segnì di scrittura in movimento, di un modo di narrare che 'si fa' man mano che procede*” (Sertoli 1998, 65).

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