Linguæ &

Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

Journal homepage: https://journals.uniurb.it/index.php/linguae
e-ISSN: 1724-8698

CITATION
Crawford, J. 'Shadows of Remorse': Guilt and Murder in Ada the Betrayed. *Linguæ & - Journal of Modern Languages and Cultures*. https://doi.org/10.14276/l.v28i2.5 072

DOI
https://doi.org/10.14276/l.v28i2.5072

RECEIVED
June 9, 2025

ACCEPTED
September 21, 2025

PUBLISHED
September 25, 2025

PEER REVIEW HISTORY
double blind review

'Shadows of Remorse': Guilt and Murder in *Ada the Betrayed*

Joseph Crawford (University of Exeter)
j.crawford@exeter.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

On This essay discusses the depiction of violence and remorse in the popular penny serial *Ada the Betrayed* (1842-3) – the first serial written by James Malcolm Rymer, who would later write the more famous serials *Varney the Vampire* (1845-7) and *The String of Pearls* (1846-7). It briefly discusses the rise of penny crime fiction in the 1830s, and the depiction of violence and trauma in the penny serials published in the years immediately preceding *Ada*, such as *Oliver Twiss* (1838-9), *Ela, the Outcast* (1839-41), and *The Maniac Father* (1842). It then explores how Ada moved away from these in its treatment of the psychology of violence, responding to the moral panic over crime fiction that followed the murder of Lord Russell in 1840, and the role played by the serial in popularising the figure of the remorseful murderer in the popular literary culture of the early Victorian period.

Joseph Crawford

University of Exeter
j.crawford@exeter.ac.uk

'Shadows of Remorse': Guilt and Murder in *Ada the Betrayed*

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the depiction of violence and remorse in the popular penny serial *Ada the Betrayed* (1842-3) – the first serial written by James Malcolm Rymer, who would later write the more famous serials *Varney the Vampire* (1845-7) and *The String of Pearls* (1846-7). It briefly discusses the rise of penny crime fiction in the 1830s, and the depiction of violence and trauma in the penny serials published in the years immediately preceding *Ada,* such as *Oliver Twiss* (1838-9), *Ela, the Outcast* (1839-41), and *The Maniac Father* (1842). It then explores how *Ada* moved away from these in its treatment of the psychology of violence, responding to the moral panic over crime fiction that followed the murder of Lord Russell in 1840, and the role played by the serial in popularising the figure of the remorseful murderer in the popular literary culture of the early Victorian period.

KEYWORDS: Gothic, penny fiction, crime fiction, criminal psychology, trauma.

It is well-known that the culture of early nineteenth-century Britain was marked by an intense interest in violent crime. The period's burgeoning print culture found an ideal source of copy in high-profile murder cases such as the Elstree murder (1823), the Red Barn murder (1827), the Burke and Hare murders (1828), the 'Italian boy' murder (1831), and the Edgeware Road murder (1837), all of which were reported on voluminously in the popular press (Crone 2012, 97-8, 220; Hollingsworth 1963, 29-37). The popular 'Newgate novels' of the 1830s tapped into this same fascination with criminality, sparking much anxiety that lower-class readers might be inspired to emulate the deeds of their criminal protagonists (Breton 2021, 50-1; Crone 2012, 78; Falke 2016, 185-7; Hollingsworth 1963, chapters 4-5).

It was during these same years that publishers such as Edward Lloyd first began to experiment with publishing penny serial fiction (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 1). Much of their content was focussed on crime: indeed, the earliest penny serials were amphibious productions, half crime reportage and half fiction. They initially tended towards matter-of-fact depictions of criminality in the style of the *Newgate Calendar*, but their treatment of criminal violence evolved as the penny press matured. In particular, as I shall discuss, the bestselling penny serial *Ada the Betrayed* (1842-3) marked a milestone in popular depictions of the psychology of violence.

Although the author of *Ada*, James Malcolm Rymer, is better known today as the probable author of *Varney the Vampire* (1845-7) and *The String of Pearls* (1846-7), it was *Ada* that first established his career: so much so that, if George Augustus Sala's later account is to be trusted, 'Ada the Betrayed' became Rymer's nickname among his fellow writers (Sala 1894, 287-8). Lloyd boasted of its "immense popularity", and its success was so great that, in an industry where anonymous and pseudonymous publication was the norm, many of Rymer's later works were published as being 'by the Author of *Ada*' to capitalise on its popularity (Rymer 1847, Preface). Indeed, it is only because they are tagged as being 'by the Author of *Ada*' that many of Rymer's later works can be attributed to him at all (Nesvet 2024, 3; Smith 2019, 50).

Many penny serials were swiftly forgotten once they ceased publication, but in *Household Words* Percy Fitzgerald described seeing a stage adaptation of *Ada* in 1858, demonstrating that its appeal outlasted its original serialisation by at least

fifteen years (Fitzgerald 1858, 550-1). Summarising its plot, Fitzgerald remarked of the villain: "Squire comes into his ill-gotten gains, and, as usual, is preyed upon by remorse" (Fitzgerald 1858, 551). But this 'as usual' should give us pause – for, as I shall discuss, remorseful villains were rare in earlier penny serials. It was only after the success of *Ada the Betrayed* that such figures became stock characters in British popular fiction.

In this article I shall thus discuss *Ada* in relation to its literary and historical contexts, to explore what its success reveals about changing attitudes towards the psychology of violence in the early Victorian period. I shall begin by briefly discussing the rise of penny crime fiction in the 1830s, and the ways in which guilt, crime, and madness were depicted in the early works of Thomas Prest, whose penny serials dominated the marketplace in the years leading up to Rymer's literary debut. I then discuss the immediate cultural contexts within which *Ada* was written, exploring how the moral panic that followed Lord Russell's murder in 1840 combined with changing norms in criminal psychiatry to create a cultural climate favourable to the depiction of criminality as both a cause and a manifestation of insanity. Finally, I examine how *Ada* interprets both "nervous" murderers (who are haunted by guilt) and "brutal" murderers (who care nothing for their crimes) in terms of the abnormal organisation of their respective nervous systems, and argue that the serial's success thus marks the point at which these newly-medicalised understandings of criminal psychology began to manifest themselves in British popular culture, with lasting consequences for subsequent development of crime fiction in Victorian Britain.

1. Between fact and fiction: the rise of the penny serial

Ada appeared at a time when the penny serial was still a new and controversial form, its rise enabled by then-recent innovations in printing, papermaking, and the development of national distribution networks (Hayward 1997, 22). The penny press was born in 1832, with the appearance of *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal, The Penny Magazine,* and *The Saturday Magazine,* all of which were priced at one penny per issue (James 1963, 14-19; Lill and McWilliam 2019, 2-3). Soon afterwards appeared *The Annals of Crime and New Newgate Calendar* (1833), which was sold weekly in eight-page penny instalments. Its title implied that it was a

reprint of the *New Newgate Calendar* (1826-8), but in fact it was an original composition that covered famous crimes right up to the date of publication. Rather than covering each case in 2-3 pages, as had been standard in both *The Newgate Calendar* (1814, 1824) and *The New Newgate Calendar, Annals of Crime* stretched many cases out to the full eight pages, turning them into standalone short stories.

One of the booksellers who distributed *Annals of Crime* was Edward Lloyd, who in 1836 began publishing his own penny crime literature in partnership with the writer Thomas Prest. Prest had already worked on *The Calendar of Horrors!* (1835-6) with George Drake, and his first penny works with Lloyd were notionally non-fiction: *History of the Pirates of All Nations* (1836–37) and *History and Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads and Murderers, Brigands, Pickpockets, Thieves, Banditti and Robbers of Every Description* (1836–37) (James 1963, 25; Crone 2012, 173). Unlike *Annals of Crime,* which dealt only with well-attested historical figures, these crime serials covered a miscellaneous mixture of historical figures, quasi-historical legends, and pure fiction, though they always maintained the pretence that their stories were entirely factual (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 6-7). Lloyd and Prest soon began to supplement these with publications such as *The Penny Play-Book* (1836) and *Tales of the Drama* (1838), which retold the plots of then-popular plays and melodramas as prose narratives, and original works such as *The Gem of Romance* (1836-7) and *Tales of Enchantment* (1836), in which one penny purchased eight pages of fiction accompanied by one woodcut engraving (Smith 2019, 40-1; Léger-St-Jean 2019, 115-17). By 1837 the spread of such serials was sufficiently well-known for Thomas Arnold to object to it in one of his sermons, complaining that the already drug-like and habit-forming qualities of popular literature were made more dangerous by them being published 'so cheap, and at regular intervals' (Hayward 1997, 6-7).

Like *Annals of Crime*, these early penny works were mostly sequences of stand-alone tales, in which individual instalments could be read in any order. Issue 6 of *The Gem of Romance* declared that "We beg to inform our Readers that we shall, in all cases, (where we possibly can) avoid Continuations": this suggests that their stand-alone nature was viewed as an important selling point, with stories stretched across multiple issues as little as possible (Anon 1836, 48). Probably Lloyd assumed there was no guarantee that the working-class reader

who had a penny to spare for an issue today would also have another penny next week for the next one, and that too many "continuations" thus risked alienating readers who could not afford to buy consecutive numbers.

That a market existed for longer-form fiction in penny instalments seems to have been discovered largely by accident. When Dickens attained commercial success with *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), which was sold at the price of one shilling per monthly issue, Prest was quick to undercut him with a weekly *Penny Pickwick* (1837-8). When the *Penny Pickwick* proved successful, Prest followed it with the similarly plagiaristic serials *Oliver Twiss* (1838-9) and *Nickelas Nicklebery* (1838) (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 7-8; Abraham 2019, 98; James 1963, 50-65). The success of these adaptations demonstrated that longer novels could be successfully sold in penny parts, and shortly afterwards Prest began what would become his most famous work: *Ela, the Outcast* (1839-41), a penny serial published in weekly parts, which adapted and massively expanded the then-popular novel *The Gipsey* [sic] *Girl* (1836) by Hannah Maria Jones. *Ela* was the most popular of the early penny serials, and allegedly sold 30,000 copies a week – a huge number for the time (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 13; Smith 2019, 42; James 2019*,* 61-4; James 1963, 26). Prest went on to write many penny serials for Lloyd, but none surpassed *Ela* in popularity (Smith 2019, 50). His subsequent works were advertised as being 'by the author of *Ela'*, and the proliferation of serial heroines in Prest's subsequent works such as *Angelina* (1840-1), *Ernnestine* [sic] *de Lacy* (1840-2), *Emily Fitzormond* (1842), *Gertrude of the Rock* (1842), and *Rosalie, or the Vagrant's Daughter* (1842) testify to his repeated attempts to match *Ela's* unprecedented success.

This was the context in which Rymer began his career as a serial writer. In 1842 he had attempted, unsuccessfully, to launch his own monthly magazine, but after five issues the publication was abandoned and he went to work for Lloyd, beginning a penny serial that ultimately became *Ada the Betrayed* (Smith 2019, 43; Nesvet 2024, 43, 56). As its title implies, *Ada* was written in imitation of *Ela,* and the popularity enjoyed by both suggests that many penny-serial readers must have transferred their allegiances almost seamlessly from *Ela* to *Ada* in 1841-2 (James 2019, 65). However, while both serials told stories filled with violence, madness, and crime, the approaches they took to this material was very different: Prest's focus was firmly on the mental toll that violent crimes took upon their

victims, whereas Rymer's serial demonstrated a new interest in the psychological damage that they might also inflict upon their perpetrators. It is this difference that I shall draw out over the following sections.

2. "My brain is on fire": trauma in the early works of Thomas Prest

As a writer, Prest was fascinated by extreme mental states – a common concern during the period, which witnessed highly public debates over the nature and treatment of insanity in the run-up to the 1845 Lunacy Act (Crawford 2019, 117-22). His key innovation was to incorporate the norms of melodrama into prose fiction: as Louis James notes, "instead of recreating the tone of the novel of feeling, *Ela* is adapted to the conventions of the melodramatic stage" (James 2019, 61). Prest's serials are consequently full of theatrical madmen and madwomen, whose ranting and raging places them in the same 'stage lunatic' tradition as then-popular melodrama characters like 'Crazy Ruth' in George Almar's *The Fire Raiser* (1821) (Crone 2012, 139). Indeed, Almar's Crazy Ruth – who at one point holds off two men with a pair of pistols – may have been an important inspiration for Prest's *Ela,* whose eponymous heroine similarly wields a pair of pistols at two crucial moments in the plot, emphasising the connections drawn by both works between melodramatic madness and deviation from traditional gender roles[1] (Prest 1841, 226, 483-4).

The plot of *Ela* unfolds through a chain reaction of trauma and madness. When Ela is abducted by the aristocratic Edward Wallingford, the shock causes her parents to decline into sickness, madness, and death, while her lover sinks into delirium so severe that "it was a matter of doubt whether he would regain his senses" (Prest 1841, 41, 53). After being seduced by Wallingford, "[Ela's]

[1] Upon drawing her pistols, Almar's 'Crazy Ruth' sings one of her mad songs, as though to emphasise that only madness could drive a woman to such unfeminine behaviour:

> I loaded ye both by the light of the midnight moon!
> I lodged each ball in each barrel fair,
> With caution I lodged them and lodged them with care
> And I said to myself, when next you depart
> Your lodging shall be the false villain's heart.
> But 'tis May-time, I must be merry – Ha! the pole is ungarnished yet, I must away for blue-bell and primrose, I must away[.] (Almar 1828, 36-7)

remorse, her anguish, were so violent that Edward began to be alarmed for her reason", and when he abandons her, she becomes "completely delirious" and attempts suicide (Prest 1841, 37, 48, 57). When Ela reappears, she is carried unconscious into a house, and upon being revived she begins "laughing hysterically", declaiming about "The honeyed poison conveyed by the tongue of treachery […] which rankles at my heart, and scorches up my brain: which has made me what I am!" (Prest 1841, 5-6)

Ela attributes her distress (which makes people "call me madwoman") to Wallingford's betrayal, and when she learns that the woman who saved her is Wallingford's pregnant wife, she seizes her "with a vehemence that made her scream" before jumping out of a window (Prest 1841, 6). Terrified by this encounter, Mrs Wallingford undergoes a mental and physical collapse: the shock "had the most dangerous effect upon her constitution", with the result that "fit had proceeded fit", rendering her "quite delirious" and ultimately causing her to miscarry (Prest 1841, 7, 10, 11, 78). Soon afterwards her daughter apparently dies in a fire, causing Mrs Wallingford to again "become delirious" and decline into "painful aberration of intellect" (Prest 1841, 107, 110). "[W]orn out with care and anxiety" and "fits of delirium", she sinks into "absolute idiocy", and finally dies (Prest 1841, 207, 215, 217, 282). Meanwhile, after being "overcome" with "terrors", her niece Maria finds that "a burning fever seemed to scorch her brain", causing symptoms that include impaired memory and physical illness (Prest 1841*,* 172). Over and over, extreme emotions are depicted as causing grave physical and mental suffering: at one point, the narrator even remarks of another character that "It was wonderful that the violence of the poor old woman's emotions did not cause her immediate death" (Prest 1841*,* 341). Prest went on to use similar storylines in his subsequent penny serial, *The Maniac Father* (1842), in which the disappearance of a daughter once again leads to repeated cases of fever and madness brought on by emotional distress (Prest 1842, 11, 17, 59-61, 95-6, 174-5, 212, 231, 353, 540-1).

However, while Prest was clearly fascinated by the idea that the suffering caused by crimes might drive their victims into madness, he was much less interested in the psychological effects they might have upon their perpetrators. Prest's criminal characters – Rupert Darwin in *Ela,* Adder in *The Maniac Father* – display remarkable psychological resilience, bouncing back from each new

misadventure ready for further acts of villainy, and to the extent that they find themselves "worked up to a pitch of madness" it is mostly by their desire to commit murders rather than their remorse at having already done so (Prest 1841*,* 597). This caused Prest considerable problems when he adapted *Oliver Twist* as *Oliver Twiss,* as the psychological unravelling of Bill Sikes and Fagin under the weight of their guilty consciences constituted some of the most famous parts of Dickens's novel. In *Oliver Twiss* Prest included regular mentions of the "uncomfortable reflections" and "dark imaginings" of his villains after committing murders, but whereas Dickens depicted the guilt of Sikes after killing Nancy as leading directly to his mental disintegration and death, his equivalents in *Oliver Twiss* are simply driven by their mental agonies to commit even more crimes of violence, continuing their criminal careers for hundreds of additional pages ('Bos' 1839*,* 82, 151, 173, 293, 438-9, 453-63, 564-5, 550, 572, 622-4). It was not until Rymer began writing *Ada* that the penny press found an author who shared Dickens's interest in the psychological costs of violent crime.

3. 'Half mad with the mental struggle': *Ada the Betrayed* and the mental costs of violence

Ada was written at a critical moment in the history of British crime fiction. In 1840 Lord William Russell was murdered by his valet, in a crime that was widely attributed to the murderer's reading of *Jack Sheppard* (1840), prompting a moral panic over the supposedly harmful effects of popular crime fiction (Breton 2021, 54; Harman 2019, 46-69, 120-4). As Cassandra Falke has shown, this case prompted concerns that stories of crime might encourage their readers to sympathise with criminals, leading to calls for the authors of such works to demonstrate clearer moral condemnation of the crimes they described (Falke 2016, 188-91).

The early 1840s were also a crucial moment in the history of British psychiatry. In 1835, J.C. Pritchard had popularised the concept of "moral insanity", arguing that extreme indifference to moral norms could be understood as a form of madness, even when it was not attended with traditional symptoms of insanity such as mania or hallucinations (Prichard 1835, 6; Pedlar 2006, 3-4). Such widening definitions of madness contributed to the M'Naghten Rules of

1843[2], which enlarged the grounds upon which criminals could be found not guilty by virtue of insanity, and provided part of the justification for the tremendous expansion of Britain's asylum system (Pedlar 2006, 8; Whitlock 1963, 20; Mellett 1982, 48; Crawford 2019, 117-19). These were also years during which the popularity of phrenology was at its height, with George Combe's *Constitution of Man* (1828) popularising the idea that all forms of mental disorder might have materialist explanations rooted in the abnormal development of the nerves and brain (Cooter 1984, chapter 4; Pedlar 2006, 4-5). Consequently, mental disturbances were increasingly understood in physiological terms, as resulting from various forms of nervous disease, with the working classes seen as being particularly vulnerable to nervous disorders (Logan 1997, chapter 5; Pedlar 2006, 5; Oppenheim 1991, 29, 46-7). One side effect of this was that what Shane McCorristine calls the "hallucination model" of ghost-seeing was rapidly gaining ground at the time, with works such as Buchanan's *Origin and Nature of Ghosts, Demons, and Spectral Illusions* (1840) attributing all seemingly supernatural experiences to malfunctions of the nervous system (McCorristine 2010, 39-49)

Ada the Betrayed can be read as a response to these factors, as Rymer used this materialist model of haunting to show how violent crimes might bring about their own punishment. Its plot revolves around a murder carried out by two men, Jacob Gray and Andrew Britton, at the instigation of a third, Squire Learmont: Learmont is secretly illegitimate, and to secure his inheritance he resolves to murder the legitimate heir, namely Ada's father. The infant Ada survives the murder, and after many adventures she is ultimately restored to her property, while Gray, Britton, and Learmont come to unhappy ends. Because this plot required Ada to grow from infancy to adulthood over the course of the story, its villains were necessarily left in possession of their ill-gotten wealth for many years – but while they may be rich, the serial makes clear that they are anything

[2] The M'Naghten Rules were introduced following the trial of Daniel M'Naghten for the murder of Edward Drummond in 1843, a crime for which M'Naghten was acquitted on grounds of insanity. The M'Naghten Rules redefined the legal test of insanity to mean that "at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong" – a significantly wider definition than had previously applied under British law. For further discussion of these rules, and their impact on British Gothic fiction, see Crawford 2020, 101-11.

but happy. In depicting their sufferings Rymer drew upon the tormented villains of Romantic-era Gothic fiction, as well as the guilt-ridden Shakespearean characters such as Macbeth who served as their original models, and the scenes describing their mental agonies are full of Shakespearean echoes[3] (Rymer 1847, 228, 365). However, while these Gothic and Shakespearean villains were often haunted by actual ghosts, Rymer made clear that the hauntings of his villains were merely hallucinations brought on by their acute psychological distress.

Amidst all his wealth, Learmont finds himself "lonely and desolate" and "half mad with the mental struggle" against his feelings of "deep dejection" and the knowledge that he has "dipped [his] hands in blood" to obtain luxuries he is unable to enjoy (Rymer 1847, 50). He insists that the "shadows of remorse" are merely "born in superstition, and fostered by prejudice" and yet he admits "the silence of this spacious hall has bred and nursed gloomy fancies in my brains":

> "Now, were I weak and superstitious, how well could busy fancy people this large space with grinning gliding shapes, such as haunt ordinary men and drive their weak brains to distraction. I hear yon echo, but I will not be alone. Ha! Ha! 'tis your concave roof that throws back my words. Now if, as I say, I were superstitious—but I am not."

[3] After drinking drugged wine, Gray experiences a nightmare vision which combines two of the most famous hallucination scenes in English literature, Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* Act 3 Scene 4, and Lady Macbeth's vision of Duncan's blood in *Macbeth* Act 5 Scene 1:

> "Don't look at me!" suddenly cried Gray, springing to his feet. "Don't glare at me with your stony eyes! Clear away—clear away. Do you want to stop my breath—I—I—must go—go—from here—there—there—help—save me. What do you do here—one—two—three. Why do you point at me? You would have your deaths. You—you—why do you not remain and rot in the Old Smithy? Save me from him. His wounds are bleeding still. Will the damp earth never soak up all the blood? You, you I shot. Don't grin at me. Away—away—I am going mad—mad—Ada—Ada—Ada—pray—pray for me!" (Rymer 1847, 228)

Later in the novel Rymer draws on the same sources for one of Learmont's guilt-induced frenzies:

> "The blood—blood—the curse of blood! Who whispers that to my heart? I did not do the deed; it was the savage smith; my hands reeked not with the gore. No, no, no. Hence, horrible shadows of the soul, hence, hence—I—I am not, I will not be your victim." (Rymer 1847, 365)

The allusions here are to Macbeth's words to Banquo's ghost ("Thou canst not say I did it – never shake / Thy gory locks at me […] Hence, horrible shadow. Unreal mockery, hence"), Lady Macbeth's words while sleepwalking ("Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.") and Macbeth's words after Duncan's murder ("Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?").

> Even as he spoke, he repeatedly turned to look behind, and it was evident that the guilty man was battling with his fears. (Rymer 1847, 50)

Learmont claims that it is only "superstitious" and "ordinary men" whose "weak brains" lead them to see "grinning gliding shapes" around them, but his glances over his own shoulder strongly suggest that he, too, is seeing things out of the corner of his eye. Later, noting that he has "grown strangely nervous", Learmont complains that "This room seems peopled with shapes", and "There seems in the house to be ever close to me some hideous, unfashioned form, whose hot breath comes on my cheek, and whose perpetual presence is a hell" – experiences that he attributes to "vapours of the brain" (Rymer 1847, 248).

The stage adaptation of *Ada* seen by Fitzgerald included a ghost, but there are no supernatural events in the serial. The closest thing it has to an undead character is Learmont himself, whose "thin and emaciated" body and "dead white" skin give him "a hideous corpse-like appearance" (Rymer 1847, 6). Yet he remains haunted – not by literal spirits, but by manifestations of his own guilt. Significantly, Learmont locates these "gloomy fancies" not in his imagination but in his "brains", implying that the things he sees have physiological causes – presumably due to the cumulative neurological damage inflicted by years of stress, which have reduced him, as his "corpse-like" appearance suggests, to a man more dead than alive.

Learmont is not "superstitious", but his fellow criminal Jacob Gray is. The mental agonies Gray suffers are consequently even worse, as he lives in fear of being haunted by the man he murdered. He believes that seeing this ghost will drive him insane, and he begs Ada to "implore him not to haunt me—not to drive me mad by a glance!" (Rymer 1847, 135). Ada is consequently able to gain power over him by exploiting his fears:

> That power was grounded on the superstition of his character—a weakness which had grown with his crimes, and been increased by the constant pangs of remorse, which even he could not stifle entirely. The solitude likewise, and the constant state of trembling anxiety in which he lived, had shattered his nervous system to that degree that he was indeed a melancholy and warning spectacle of the mental and bodily wreck to which crime is sure to reduce its unhallowed perpetrators. (Rymer 1847, 167)

Even more than Learmont, Gray serves as an emblematic example of the psychological toll that acts of violence take upon "the man of crime". In fearing that his victim's ghost will drive him mad, he has mistaken cause for effect: he is *already* mad with anxiety, and the chief symptom of his madness is his morbid terror of seeing ghosts. Once again, his sufferings are explained in terms of cumulative neurological damage: guilt and fear have exacerbated his "weakness" until his "nervous system" is "shattered". Unlike Learmont, who knows that the ghosts he sees are hallucinations brought on by the "vapours" of his brain, Gray lives in fear of encountering a real ghost, perhaps recalling the tradition that people buried in unhallowed ground, like Ada's murdered father, are most likely to return to haunt the living. Yet it is he himself who is truly "unhallowed", reduced, like Learmont, to a ghostly state of living death by his own "trembling anxiety" and remorse.

Both Learmont and Gray experience their worst mental agonies in sleep, when "the imagination, now freed from the control of reason, conjured up fearful images into the brain of the man of crime" (Rymer 1847, 355). "Well might the man of crime dread to sleep", comments the narrator, as Gray suffers terrible nightmares in which "fancy slept not; but, ever wakeful, conjured up strange ghastly shapes to scare the sleeper" (Rymer 1847, 169). Learmont, meanwhile, is "tortured with frightful dreams, and images of terror flitted before his mental vision" (Rymer 1847, 368). Both experience their dreams as a form of haunting, in which they are pursued by dead men. Gray dreams of being seized and embraced by a "ghastly rotting corpse", while in Learmont's nightmares he flees from "livid spectres, as if fresh from the reeking corruptions of the tomb" (Rymer 1847, 170, 369):

> The flesh hung rag-like upon the yellow moistened bones, and huge drops of green and sickly corruption fell dashing like the preludes of a thunder storm, upon the stairs. Worms and moist things were crawling in and out the sightless eyes—the rattling lips grinned horribly, and amid the havoc of the grave, Learmont could recognise the features of those whom he had driven to death. (Rymer 1847, 369)

This gruesome scene is reminiscent of Romantic-era Gothic fiction: in particular, the description of how "Worms and moist things were crawling in and out the sightless eyes" recalls *The Monk* (1796), where a walking corpse is

introduced with a description of how "The worms, They crept in, and the worms, They crept out, / And sported his eyes and his temples about" (Lewis 1995, 315). These "livid spectres", however, are not actual supernatural beings like those in *The Monk:* they are the products of Learmont's "fanc[y]", and the grotesquerie of their appearance is a measure of the guilt he feels over "those whom he had driven to death". These visions are attributed not to real hauntings but to the physical consequences of the constant stress that both men live with, which induces a "mental fever" in Learmont and causes Gray to suffer "the mad fever of his blood" (Rymer 1847, 364, 170).

Gray and Learmont thus embody the possibility that murder might carry its own punishment with it. The traditional punishment for murder was death, and both men do eventually die as a result of their crimes – but first they suffer mental agonies that turn their lives into a kind of living death, in which they are haunted by ghosts conjured by their "shattered […] nervous system[s]" and the "gloomy fancies in [their] brains". In this they are quite unlike the villains of Prest's earlier serials, who experience such remorse only when dying, and sometimes not even then (Prest 1841, 597-8, 826). But *Ada* did also include a depiction of remorseless criminality in its third villain, Andrew Britton.

4. "Your sealed black heart": the 'hardened' criminal

While Gray and Learmont suffer agonies of guilt, *Ada* makes clear that such responses to violence are not universal: as Learmont complains, "Others have spilt blood as well as I, and they have not been thus haunted" (Rymer 1847, 248). Their fellow murderer, Britton, experiences no such symptoms: a violent drunkard, he is depicted as being indifferent to the harm that he inflicts on others, thus seemingly making him an exception to the narrator's claims about 'the mental and bodily wreck to which crime is sure to reduce its unhallowed perpetrators' (Rymer 1847, 167). Gray himself recognises the difference between them, as he makes clear when Learmont invites him to commit another murder:

> "No, no," said Gray, confused; "I—I cannot—my nerves will not permit me. I really cannot. If you shrink yourself from the deed, why there is Andrew Britton, the savage smith, who revels and rejoices in blood. He will do the deed for you without a murmur."

> "You think then that Britton is the best man I can employ to commit a murder?"
> "I do." (Rymer 1847, 344)

Once again, the narrative offers physical explanations for these psychological differences: the contrast between the terrified Gray and the "savage" Britton is due to the difference in their "nerves". Physically and psychologically ruined by committing one murder, Gray's "nerves" are simply not strong enough for him to commit another – and nor are Learmont's, as is clear from the way that he "shrink[s] from the deed". But Britton is quite another matter, and for him, violence is a source not of guilt, but of "revel[ing] and rejoic[ing]".

Near the end of *Ada*, Britton murders Gray at Learmont's instigation, in a scene of truly shocking violence. Unsurprisingly, Learmont and Britton respond to this episode in very different ways:

> Britton felt himself almost injured that Gray could not be brought to life again in order to give him again the pleasure of dashing Bond's cleaver into his quivering brain.
> But what were these thoughts of the coarse-minded, brutal animal, Britton, in comparison with the whirlwind of frightful feelings that made a hell in the teeming brain of Learmont. If he looked up to the sky, huge gouts of blood seemed to intercept his view of the blue vault of heaven; if he cast his eyes downwards, he could not divest himself of the idea that he was treading in ensanguined pools of human gore. He ground his teeth together till he produced a resemblance of the crashing sound which the cleaver wielded by Britton had made as it came in contact with the crunched bones of Gray's skull. His last despairing cry of "Mercy—mercy—mercy!" was still ringing in his ears; and, finally, such was the intense excitement of his feelings, that he was compelled to lean upon the arm of Britton as he gasped,—
> "I—I—shall go mad—I shall go mad. Andrew Britton, get me some water to cool my brain. I shall go mad!" (Rymer 1847, 423)

Being merely a "brutal animal" – the narrator compares him to "an overgorged reptile" – Britton feels no guilt at Gray's murder: in fact, it gives him so much "pleasure" that he wishes he could do it again (Rymer 1847, 422). Learmont, by contrast, suffers "frightful feelings" and hallucinations until he fears "I shall go mad". Again, this difference in responses is attributed to the

physiological differences between them. Britton's "coarse" mind, which is "half maddened by rage and drink", is not susceptible to remorse, only an animalistic joy in violence, whereas Learmont's sensitive nerves "made a hell in [his] teeming brain" (Rymer 1847, 164, 423).

Britton regards his lack of anxiety as proof that he is sane and healthy, unlike the oversensitive Learmont and Gray. But as the bereaved madwoman Maud points out, his "sealed black heart" may also indicate a form of madness:

> "Peace," cried Britton. "You are mad."
> "Yes, mad—mad," said Maud; "but not so mad as Andrew Britton, for he has murdered—murdered the innocent. There's blood on your hands!"
> Britton started and involuntarily glanced at his hands.
> "Ay blood—blood," cried Maud; "you may wash away the outward stain, but then it clings to your heart; and when you are asked at the last if you are guiltless or not of shedding man's blood, you will hold up your hand, and it will drip with gore!" (Rymer 1847, 159)

It is entirely typical of Britton that he literally checks his hands for bloodstains, rather than understanding Maud's words in a moral or spiritual sense. Learmont and Gray both suffer guilt-induced hallucinations of dripping blood, but Britton never does (Rymer 1847, 228, 365). Maud, however, implies that his indifference to the blood he has shed may itself be a kind of insanity: by rights he *should* feel guilt, and the fact that he does not implies that there may be something even more profoundly wrong with him than with the more obviously symptomatic Gray or Learmont. As Maud tells him, "There is nothing in nature so dark and terrible as thy heart" (Rymer 1847, 160).

Ada thus offers two distinct models of criminal psychology: the "nervous" murderer, for whom committing murder is a tremendous trauma that brings with it a lifetime of physical and mental ill-health, and the "brutal" murderer, for whom murder is a matter of indifference. Crucially, however, it suggests that the latter *may also be a form of madness* (or perhaps "moral insanity"), resulting from the abnormal coarseness of the murderer's nerves and brain, which renders them unable to comprehend the moral weight of their own crimes. The descriptions of Britton as "savage", "brutal", and an "animal" repeatedly position him as

something less than fully human – a model which Rymer returned to three years later when describing his most famous penny-serial villain, Sweeney Todd.

5. Conclusion: *Ada the Betrayed* and the psychology of murder

As I have discussed, *Ada the Betrayed* was published at a moment when both haunting and criminality were increasingly coming to be understood in physiological terms, as forms of madness resulting from nervous disease. With its emphasis on the relationship between criminality and madness, and on the toll that violent crimes took upon the nerves and brains of their perpetrators, *Ada the Betrayed* might be taken as marking the point at which these ideas began to percolate down to the level of popular culture. Whereas Prest's earlier serials had mostly remained true to the old *Newgate Calendar* tradition, in which madness was something that happened to victims rather than criminals and murderers seldom expressed remorse unless they were caught, Rymer had moved with the times, expressing a new fascination with the anguished psychology of violence and guilt. This cultural shift was neatly captured by Dickens in *Oliver Twist,* in a scene where Fagin gives Oliver a Newgate Calendar:

> He turned over the leaves. Carelessly at first; but, lighting on a passage which attracted his attention, he soon became intent upon the volume. It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals; and the pages were soiled and thumbed with use. Here, he read of dreadful crimes that made the blood run cold; of secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside; of bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells: which would not keep them down, deep as they were, but had yielded them up at last, after many years, and so maddened the murderers with the sight, that in their horror they had confessed their guilt, and yelled for the gibbet to end their agony. Here, too, he read of men who, lying in their beds at dead of night, had been tempted (so they said) and led on, by their own bad thoughts, to such dreadful bloodshed as it made the flesh creep, and the limbs quail, to think of. The terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore; and the words upon them, to be sounded in his ears, as if they were whispered, in hollow murmurs, by the spirits of the dead. (Dickens 1966, 196-7)

Fagin gives Oliver this book because he hopes it will inspire him with a love of crime: the same effect that it seems to have had upon his other boys, who view the Calendar as bestowing a glamorous immortality upon the criminals it describes, and are consequently distraught by the idea that the Artful Dodger may never grace its pages. ("Nobody will never know half of what he was. How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar?") (Dickens 1966, 390). But Oliver is a boy of the new generation, and what strikes him is not the glamour of these violent crimes but the way they "maddened the murderers" until death seemed preferable to their mental "agony" – an idea which takes hold of Oliver's imagination so forcefully that he, like the murderers he reads about, begins to feel that he is haunted "by the spirits of the dead". Prest had no interest in such themes, and when he adapted *Oliver Twist* as *Oliver Twiss* he left this scene out entirely. In *Ada the Betrayed,* however, Rymer seems to have taken these ideas and made them foundational to his plot.

As I have discussed, this decision must be understood in relation to the moral panic over popular crime fiction that took hold of Britain in the 1840s. It was very much a sign of the times that when the 1843 volume of *Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany* was collected for publication, Lloyd added a preface emphasising that *Ada the Betrayed* had been written with a firm moral purpose, and was consequently more likely to discourage crimes than to inspire them:

> We shall make it our study to maintain the high majesty of virtue over the turbulence of vice, and to make our pages, while they glow with the romantic and the chivalrous, so replete with true nobility of sentiment, that we shall, as hitherto, find our way, and maintain our place, among the young and pure of heart. (Lloyd 1843, iii)

When *Ada* was collected in a single volume, its new preface further emphasised its moral and educational character:

> The working of retribution upon the guilty, the self-congratulation and ennoblement of mind which always accompany a good action, and the degradation and misery to which vice subjects its possessor, have all been delineated in a natural manner.
> With these few observations, the work is left in the hand of the reader for his attentive perusal. (Rymer 1847, Preface)

Rob Breton has noted the lack of any serious engagement with politics in *Ada,* even though it appeared during a period of intense Chartist activism (Breton 2021, 118-20). In this context, the serial's heavy emphasis on the miseries entailed in violent crime can be understood as another way in which *Ada* signalled its own social harmlessness. Unlike *Ela, the Outcast* or *Jack Sheppard, Ada* repeatedly emphasised that indulging in "the turbulence of vice" leads "in a natural manner" to "degradation and misery". "The working of retribution upon the guilty" is manifested not through the justice of the state – none of its three villains are ever tried for their murders – but through the psychological costs of violence, which ultimately lead all three men to destruction. The result is a work which invites its readers, like Oliver Twist with his Newgate Calendar, to focus more upon the mental anguish of the criminal than upon the excitement of their violent crimes.

Britton, Learmont, and Gray are murderers, but they are hardly glamorous figures: Britton is portrayed as animalistic and barely human, while Learmont and Gray are so tormented by guilt that their lives dwindle into a form of living death. Writing in the immediate aftermath of Lord Russell's murder, Rymer may well have written them in this way precisely so that he could claim to have "maintain[ed] the high majesty of virtue", making his novel less likely to corrupt "the young and pure of heart". But in the process he also introduced into the penny crime serial a new focus on the psychological costs of murder, with such effectiveness that fifteen years later Fitzgerald could watch a stage adaptation of *Ada* and remark, quite casually: "Squire comes into his ill-gotten gains, and, as usual, is preyed upon by remorse" (Fitzgerald 1858, 551).

References

Abraham, Adam. 2019. "The Man Who Would Be Dickens: Thomas Peckett Prest, Plagiarist". Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam, eds., *Edward Lloyd and His World*. New York: Routledge. 96-113.

Almar, George. 1828. *The Fire Raiser! or, the Prophet of the Moor*. London: G.H. Davidson.

Anon. 1836. "Notice". *The Gem of Romance* 6: 48.

'Bos' [i.e. Thomas Prest]. 1839. *Oliver Twiss*. London: E. Lloyd.

Breton, Rob. 2021. *The Penny Politics of Victorian Popular Fiction.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Cooter, Roger. 1984. *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organisation of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crawford, Joseph. 2019. *Inspiration and Insanity in British Poetry.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Crawford, Joseph. 2020. "No More Than a Brute or a Wild Beast: *Wagner the Werewolf, Sweeney Todd*, and the Limits of Human Responsibility." Sam George and Bill Hughes, eds., *In the Company of Wolves.* Manchester: Manchester University Press. 101-112.

Crone, Rosalind. 2012. *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Dickens, Charles. 1966. *Oliver Twist.* Ed. Peter Fairclough. London: Penguin.

Falke, Cassandra. 2016. "On the Morality of Immoral Fiction: Reading Newgate Novels, 1830-1848". *Nineteenth Century Contexts,* 38:3. 183-193.

Fitzgerald, Percy. 1858. "My Long Lost Chee-yld!". *Household Words,* 426: 548-52.

Harman, Claire. 2019. *Murder by the Book: A Sensational Chapter in Victorian Crime.* London: Penguin.

Hayward, Jennifer. 1997. *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fiction from Dickens to Soap Opera.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Hollingsworth, Keith. 1963. *The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

James, Louis. 2019. "'*I Am Ada!':* Edward Lloyd and the Creation of the Victorian 'Penny Dreadful'". Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam, eds., *Edward Lloyd and His World.* New York: Routledge. 54-70.

James, Louis. 1963. *Fiction For the Working Man, 1830-1850.* London: Oxford University Press.

Léger-St-Jean, Marie. 2019. "Thomas Peckett Prest and the Denvils: Mediating Between Edward Lloyd and the Stage". Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam, eds., *Edward Lloyd and His World.* New York: Routledge. 114-31.

Lewis, Matthew. 1995. *The Monk*. Ed. Howard Anderson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lill, Sarah Louise, and McWilliam, Rohan. 2019. "Introduction: Edward Lloyd, Eminent Victorian". Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam, eds., *Edward Lloyd and His World*. New York: Routledge. 1-21.

Lloyd, Edward. 1843. "Preface". *Lloyd's Weekly Penny Miscellany of Romance and General Interest,* vol. 1. London: E. Lloyd. iii-iv.

Logan, Peter. 1997. *Nerves and Narratives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

McCorristine, Shane. 2010. *Spectres of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mellett, D.J. 1982. *The Prerogative of Asylumdom*. New York: Garland.

Nesvet, Rebecca. 2024. *James Malcolm Rymer, Penny Fiction, and the Family*. New York: Routledge.

Oppenheim, Janet. 1991. *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients and Depression in Victorian England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pedlar, Valerie. 2006. *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Prest, Thomas. 1841. *Ela, the Outcast; or, the Gypsy of Rosemary Dell*. London: E. Lloyd.

Prest, Thomas. 1842. *The Maniac Father; or, the Victim of Seduction*. London: E. Lloyd.

Prichard, James Cowles. 1835. *A Treatise on Insanity*. London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper.

Rymer, James Malcolm. 1847. *Ada the Betrayed*. London: E. Lloyd.

Sala, George Augustus. 1894. *London Up To Date*. London: Adam and Charles Black.

Smith, Helen. 2019. "Edward Lloyd and His Authors". Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam, eds., *Edward Lloyd and His World*. New York: Routledge. 39-53.

Whitlock, F.A. 1963. *Criminal Responsibility and Mental Illness*. London: Butterworths.