

ABSTRACT

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Abstract: True-crime subjects were compelling material for authors of British nineteenth century melodramas. The “crime melodrama” category developed quickly in the 1820s, redeploing the hallmark conventions of the genre to suit its needs. The story of Maria Marten and William Corder, also known as the Murder in the Red Barn, was one of the most enduring subjects. This paper follows the changing Red Barn story through three nineteenth century adaptations. The oldest extant play dates from the same year as the murder trial and translated the story from press accounts to a stage in London’s East End in 1828. The next play demonstrates the ways in which the story was altered again to suit a theatre in Wales. The last, a production script for a touring company, is the least factual but the most sophisticated. These adaptations provide a window into the regional, cultural, and professional expectations for crime melodrama.

MURDER AND MELODRAMA: THE RED BARN STORY ON STAGE

By

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Introduction

“Melodrama” refers to a theatrical style that was popular in France and other parts of Europe, but truly came to dominate the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century. Over time, melodramas became famous, or infamous, for their hallmark combination of simple characters, technical effects, music, and rapid storytelling. Melodrama developed its own categories and subgenres that dealt with different themes, from the gothic romantic to the nautical adventure, but the one of interest here is the subgenre of crime melodrama. Although most melodramas put great emphasis on some crime intended by the villain, the crime melodrama was fixated on instances where a crime was completed and the criminal had to be punished. True-crime melodrama took the form a step further, by deliberately choosing real events, usually contemporary murders, as source material. Adapting murder cases for the English stage was not exactly new, since it had been done at least as early as *Arden of Faversham*, published anonymously in 1592. But the number of British murder dramas, whether true-crime or fiction, exploded between 1821 and 1840. There are at least seventy nineteenth-century plays with the word “murder” in the title alone, and twenty-five of these were produced during those two decades.¹ In addition to their popularity in London, house dramatists in such a seemingly inconsequential region as Wales adapted the same criminal events for their audiences as did playwrights in the larger London playhouses, and theatrical tours to the provinces found warm welcomes.

¹ Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 88.

In the 1820s, melodramatic playwrights got to work penning plays based on true and recent events. In the winter of 1823, when the Surrey Theatre staged an adaptation of the sensational Thurtell and Weare murder entitled *The Gamblers*, manager Llewellyn “Boiled Beef” Williams acquired the accused murderer’s sofa, table, carriage and horse for use in the performance.² One of the most popular dramas presented by the Surrey Theatre was Edward Fitzball’s *Jonathan Bradford; or, The Murder at the Roadside Inn*, updating a homicide that actually occurred almost a hundred years earlier. The play ran for 264 consecutive nights in 1833.³ The Royal Victoria Theatre became known as “the bleedin’ Vic” because of the number of murder plays produced there, including the enduring *Sweeney Todd*.⁴ Of all the subject matter available, the story of Maria Marten and the Murder in the Red Barn was arguably one of the most popular. It was translated into ballads, waxworks, puppet theatres, broadsides, camera obscura shows, and, most importantly, fully produced melodramas that long outlived the case’s historical memory. Playbills and advertisements indicate that some version of this tale held the stage throughout the century, and scripts survive from versions definitely played in a London theatre, in a theatre in Wales, and on provincial tours.

The Red Barn story likely became popular, and consequently important, simply because it was in the right place at the right time. Swirling around the story was a “perfect storm” of external circumstances that allowed the tale of seduction and murder to entrench itself in the public consciousness. At the moment the Red Barn events

² Advertisement, “New Surrey Theatre Re-Production of *The Gamblers*,” 15 Jan 1824. Original image reproduced in Albert Borowitz, *The Thurtell-Hunt Murder Case: Dark Mirror to Regency England* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 91, 129.

³ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 88-89.

⁴ James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen & Co, 1973), 42.

appeared, England's social and economic structure was undergoing substantial shifts. Increases in urbanization and the looming Industrial Revolution paradoxically fed a general longing for a mythologized, frail, pastoral rural heritage. The Red Barn case allowed for a perfect juxtaposition of the fragile rural world and strange urban world. Parliament took up legal reforms that were long overdue, and just as the Red Barn story began to spread, a newly official and professional police force was established, making the Officer of the Law a fresh, important figure. Particularly in London, the number of educational institutions increased and literacy rates rose rapidly, so that substantial portions of every class were able to read. The popular press, logically, was also growing, churning out increasing numbers of cheap newspapers and pamphlets, and as they grew they sought ever more source material to feed to their hungry readers. When printers came upon a lucrative subject, they were not likely to let it slip from their pages, and thus the Red Barn case was a featured part of popular literature for months on end. The work-a-day theatre world was similarly eager for appealing new material, and Red Barn story presented an obvious subject for a hastily constructed popular drama. Even after the London audiences tired of the Red Barn, well-equipped touring companies found it still played profitably to audiences in other parts of the country for decades after the victim and villain had both been dispatched.

This study begins with the historical events surrounding the case of Maria Marten and William Corder. The case became known as the "Murder in the Red Barn," since Maria Marten's body was recovered from a shallow grave in the red-shingled barn belonging to William Corder. Criminal activities, murder among them, were fixtures of the London newspaper scene during the nineteenth century, and in 1828 the press fixed

on the Red Barn case and made it available, in all its sensational glory, to a consuming public. The press accounts of the events became the first and closest point of access for interested parties, including the dramatists. Most of the historical details can still be discerned from a careful reading of original press accounts, as well as an important book on the case which was authored by *Times* reporter James Curtis and published first in 1828, the same year the case went to trial. The plays, like the news item headlines they followed, carry some variant of *Murder in the Red Barn* or *Maria Marten* in the title. Parts of the following discussion will try to explain how the case was covered by the press and received by the public. If it is also true that popular dramas based on reasonably contemporary events include commentary and reflections of current cultural anxieties, the Red Barn murder plays, and their variations across the nineteenth century, might provide a window for accessing some of these shifting cultural concerns, and since the Red Barn story was adopted by playhouses in multiple locations, it is uniquely situated to reflect regional differences as well.

The Red Barn case provided raw material laden with an interesting combination of passion, seduction, sin, provincial life, family ties, and murder most foul. Melodramatic performances were commonly intended for a public often presumed to be middle and lower class, somewhat illiterate, conservative, religious and hard working. But why would playhouses want to bring sordid tales of murder and seduction to such a consumer group in the first place? What elements of the real criminal event must be altered to make it acceptable to the melodrama's intended audience, and how do the changes made to the tale demonstrate the demands, and concerns, of this audience? The ability to compare three different, extant scripts all seeded by the same event makes the

trio of Red Barn plays uniquely useful in this regard. The remainder of this study will examine each play in turn.

The first script I will discuss was written by West Digges and published in 1828. The complete script rests in the Rare Books collection at the Law Library, Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.⁵ At this moment, I do not believe any other theatre scholar is aware of the existence of this script. I was able to locate only one recently published article about Red Barn dramas, a 2004 piece by Catherine Pedley. In this article, she stated that she was “unable to trace an example that can be dated as from the 1820s.”⁶ Because it bears publication information and is referenced specifically within James Curtis’s book, I am in the odd position of finding that my most unique, obscure, and oldest bit of evidence is also my most easily dated and definitively identified. Unlike other scripts that deal with this subject, Digges’s version was published within months of the trial, and performed in London’s suburbs upwards of forty nights.

The second script I will examine poses as many problems as answers. This script can be accessed in Michael Kilgarriff’s compilation *The Golden Age of Melodrama*. Although attributed to the resident playwright at the Star Theatre in Swansea, the author’s name is unknown. This is a frustrating but not entirely uncommon feature of working with popular theatre material from the nineteenth century. Kilgarriff is unaware that the

⁵ Those seeking the script may use call number KD372.C665 C665 1828 LL TRIALS, and will need to make a special appointment with the Rare Books curator at the Law Library reading room. The West Digges script is bound along with newspaper clippings and an 1828 first edition of J. (James) Curtis’ seminal book on the case, published by Thomas Kelly of London. The book’s full title is *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten with a Full Development of all the Extraordinary Circumstances which Led to the Discovery of Her Body in The Red Barn; to Which is Added, the Trial of William Corder, Taken at Large in Short Hand Specially for This Work, with an Account of His Execution, Dissection, &c., and Many Interesting Particulars Relative to the Village of Polstead and Its Vicinity; The Prison Correspondence of Corder, and Fifty-Three Letters, in Answer to his Advertisement for a Wife.*

⁶ Catherine Pedley, “*Maria Marten, or the Murder in the Red Barn: The Theatricality of Provincial Life,*” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 37.

Digges script was published, as he believes the Swansea version to be the first printed Red Barn script. It is almost impossible to clearly date the creation of the Swansea text. The Swansea script appears to have been printed in 1877, but this does little to help establish the original date of authorship, and Kilgarriff himself notes that by the time of publication “it must have seemed very old-fashioned.”⁷ Even a cursory examination makes it clear that the Swansea version is, in fact, largely a verbatim copy of the 1828 script, although I do believe that the few changes to the play may indicate both the taste of the audiences and the business of theatre in Wales.

The third script to be examined survived as a tattered production manuscript passed down through the John Latimer family, complete with stage directions. Slater cannot provide a clear date for this script’s origin, either. The John Latimer family passed down both the name and their portable theatre, so it is difficult to trace which John Latimer was responsible for writing this particular play. In its own day, this script appears to have gone unpublished but is accessible today in editions edited by Montagu Slater and published in 1921, 1928, and 1971. It should not be discounted just because it was not disseminated in print during its own time. Plays are meant to be seen, not read, and the Latimer family ran a successful touring company that performed this Red Barn version throughout England and Wales. The Latimer script, however, differs wildly from the other two versions, and, I think, demonstrates a more advanced sense of what makes a theatrical production “good,” as opposed to what makes a story factually correct.

Since it has proven almost impossible to pin down the dates for the second and third plays, my earlier intention to trace the development of cultural concerns had to be

⁷ Michael Kilgarriff, “Introduction to Maria Martin, or the Murder in the Red Barn,” *The Golden Age of Melodrama* (London: Wolfe Publishing Ltd, 1974), 205.

set aside. It is not possible to demonstrate that the concerns found within these melodramas are part of a cultural evolution or chronological progression. Nevertheless, I think the melodramas here do reflect concerns and issues of their general period and, particularly, their place. It may be that successful playhouses have always had to consider their intended audience, but this became a necessary function of theatre management and popular dramatists during the nineteenth century. During this period, theatres made it part of their business to differentiate themselves by the kind of material they chose to offer. It is no co-incidence that London's Royal Coburg became known as "the Blood Tub." Any spectator not wishing to indulge in bloody murder melodramas would have known to steer clear of this house; such a person might, instead, choose to step into the Adelphi, a theatre with a reputation founded on producing patriotic nautical plays. The chosen fare provided by a playhouse was determined largely by its audience demographic, which was in turn influenced by its geographic location. As Michael Booth explained in his article "A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama," the popular melodrama was very responsive to the social stresses that concerned its audience, including attitudes towards labor practices and class, "attitudes whose variations depend in part upon the geographical location of particular theatres in working-class districts or in the middle-class West End."⁸ Predictably, the working poor in London's newly urbanized East End were often moved by subjects that the upper middle classes did not find compelling, and the provincial touring theatres often ran into a different set of concerns altogether. Identifying the original home theatre of the Red Barn adaptations may help illuminate why the authors framed their subject matter the way they did.

⁸ Michael R. Booth, "A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal* 26, no. 1 (March 1974): 10.

In the following chapters, I have tried to tease out differences and similarities in the plays themselves, as well as identify structural and textual features that help a twenty-first century reader better understand both the play and the world in which it originally existed. In an attempt to make sense of the complex relationships among characters, both fictional and historical, I have tried to refer to the historical figures by full name or last name, and the fictional characters by first name, as they appear in their respective scripts. It is worth bearing in mind that the three Red Barn plays may not be great works of literature, but they are great fun, and, I hope, not irrelevant relics of a lively period when theatre was immensely popular.

Chapter 1: Atrocious Murder in Suffolk

The historical Maria Marten was born in 1801, the oldest child of Grace and Thomas Marten who lived in the Suffolk town of Polstead. Thomas Marten earned a living as a mole-catcher, which, although not a lofty position, was an essential one in their agricultural setting. As a child, Maria Marten learned to read and write while working in the home of a clergyman. Around age nine, before her education could be completed, her mother died and she returned home to take care of her siblings, including her sister Anne. When she was a teenager, her father remarried; the new wife was also named Anne. Mrs. Anne Marten was only a few years older than her eldest step-daughter, but most accounts indicate that Mrs. Marten and Maria Marten got along rather well.

At age eighteen, Maria Marten began a relationship with a young man named Thomas Corder, the son of a neighboring farmer. This liaison was one of the first in a string that would seem to indicate Maria Marten's determination to marry into a family with more money and status than her own. Thomas Corder's father was also the local squire and a landlord holding several properties, including the cottage rented by the Marten family. The Corder house itself was "one of the best in the place, where strictly speaking, there are not above a half-a-dozen."⁹ One pamphleteer later wrote about Thomas Corder: "This person, though the fact is not generally known, was the original

⁹ "Polstead," *The Mirror* (London), [1828?]. Undated clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

seducer of the girl.” When Maria Marten became pregnant, Thomas Corder broke off the relationship, ostensibly fearing parental disapproval. Their baby lived only a few weeks.¹⁰

After she was no longer able to see the oldest Corder son, Maria Marten’s attentions were drawn to an older, successful businessman. Mr. Mathews, as everyone referred to him, spent extended periods visiting relatives in Polstead. Maria Marten and Peter Mathews began a romantic relationship, and it was Mathews “by whom Miss Martin [*sic*] had a fine little boy,” who she named Thomas Henry.¹¹ As Mrs. Anne Marten explained in court testimony, Mathews accepted responsibility for the child and “used to allow Maria five pounds a quarter” for child support, a notably generous amount.¹² Mathews did not, however, continue his relationship with Maria Marten. Marten and her son remained with her parents, who assisted in raising the child and in spending the allowance that arrived through the mail four times a year. It was shortly after that affair ended that Maria Marten met William Corder, the youngest member of the Corder family.

As a boy, William Corder had a tempestuous relationship with his overbearing father. Later, at his trial, the prosecution and press made much of the fact that he had committed petty frauds in retaliation, chiefly borrowing small amounts of money from

¹⁰ *The Trial of William Corder at Bury St. Edmund’s Before the Lord Chief Baron Alexander, on the 7th and 8th of August 1828, for the Murder of Maria Marten; Together with Some Account of Their Lives, Containing a Narration of the Numerous Atrocities Committed by Corder, and Other Interesting Particulars Hitherto Unpublished* (Bury St. Edmund’s: T. D. Dutton, 1828), 14.

¹¹ “Polstead, July 25, From a Correspondent,” [1828?]. Clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC. The clipping is likely from the *London Times*, since the misspelling of the Marten last name matches their reports from the time.

¹² J. Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten with a Full Development of all the Extraordinary Circumstances which Led to the Discovery of Her Body in The Red Barn; to Which is Added, the Trial of William Corder, Taken at Large in Short Hand Specially for This Work, with an Account of His Execution, Dissection, &c., and Many Interesting Particulars Relative to the Village of Polstead and Its Vicinity; The Prison Correspondence of Corder, and Fifty-Three Letters, in Answer to his Advertisement for a Wife*, (London: Thomas Kelly, 1828), 50.

neighbors under false pretences and stealing, then selling, his own father's pigs. For schooling, the youngest Corder was sent to a private academy, but was not encouraged to pursue college studies. He was ordered to return home to help on the farm, but he did not seem well suited for farm life, and was sent to London to apply to the Merchant Navy, where they rejected him partly due to his poor eyesight. Corder soon returned to the family farm in Polstead. His acts of fraud and theft apparently continued, for a number of merchants and bank tellers later swore convincingly under oath that he had swindled them out of money and furniture, accusations to which William Corder offered no contradiction.¹³

In 1826, in Polstead, a romantic relationship developed between Corder and Marten, who "became intimate shortly previous to May 1826; and an illegitimate child was the fruit of their illicit commerce."¹⁴ Although he had been quite willing to be seen in public with her during their initial courtship, William Corder, like his older brother before him, was concerned about how his family would react to news of the baby. Near the end of her pregnancy, Corder arranged for Marten to stay in rented apartments in nearby Sudsbury. Landlady Mary Anne Godwin testified, "I knew Maria Marten, who lodged with me in March, 1827.... [Corder] treated her always with kindness and they appeared very much attached to each other."¹⁵ When the baby was about a month old,

¹³ J. Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten...*, (1828), 18-21 and 45-48.

¹⁴ *The Red Barn Tragedy! An Authentic Narrative of the Atrocious Murder of Maria Marten: Giving Full Particulars of the Miraculous Discovery of the Body in the Red Barn, Polstead: And Also the Trial of William Corder, for the Said Murder, at Bury on Thursday and Friday, August 7 & 8, 1828, Before Mr. Baron Alexander, with an Account of his Execution*, 3rd ed., (Southwark: G. Smeeton and G.H. Davidson, 1828), 4.

¹⁵ *The Trial of William Corder, at the Assizes, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, August 7th and 8th, 1828, for the Murder of Maria Marten in the Red Barn at Polstead: Including the Matrimonial Advertisement*,

Marten returned to her family's cottage in Polstead, but the child became ill and died within a few weeks: "Those who witnessed its daily decline consider that its death arose from natural causes." Corder put the baby's corpse into a box, claiming he would arrange burial at Sudsbury, the child's birthplace, an assertion that was unusual but evidently plausible. "Maria accompanied him, and remained absent from home two days; but this circumstance appearing natural, no inquiry was made relative to the child, and the affair would, in all probability, have been buried in eternal oblivion."¹⁶ Eventually, suspicions about the baby's death and secret burial led to fantastic rumors; the version most often transmitted involved Corder poisoning the child and Marten blackmailing him with her knowledge of the crime. This handy explanation grew in popularity perhaps because, though completely unsubstantiated, it added depth to Corder's crimes and provided a possible motive for him to murder Marten. Subsequent searches of graves and burial documents in Sudsbury and other neighboring towns showed no record of the child's burial in any Christian graveyard, indicating the body was probably interred in an unmarked plot somewhere in the nearby woods or fields.

The final chapter in Maria Marten's life is pieced together from the testimony of the Marten family. According to their statements, William Corder told her that the local magistrate had taken out a warrant for her arrest on account of her having bastard children, a charge which Corder could save her from if she would go with him to Ipswich and be married under a special license. (The magistrate himself later testified that no such warrant ever existed.) On 18 May 1827, Marten agreed to leave for Ipswich. She packed

and Many Other Curious and Important Particulars, Obtained Exclusively by the Editor (London: Knight and Lacey, 1828), 52.

¹⁶ J. Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten...*, (1828). 48-49.

a bag and arranged a rendezvous with Corder at the red-shingled barn. Out of concern that she might be seen by either the magistrate or by Corder's family, "Corder's relations being hostile to the connection," she was to disguise herself by dressing like a man.¹⁷ Corder provided her with some of his brother's clothes and Marten's stepmother helped her get ready. Mrs. Anne Marten testified that when Maria Marten left, she put on a handmade Irish linen chemise and tied two silk handkerchiefs around her neck. Additionally, "she had a man's hat on, and one large and two small combs in her hair, and ear rings in her ears." Then the twenty-seven year old woman took her green cotton umbrella and left her father's cottage for the last time.¹⁸ Corder was seen going to the Red Barn by a different path, and later that day, Maria Marten's eight-year-old half-brother George spotted Corder, "coming from the barn with a pick-axe on his shoulder."¹⁹ At the time, George Marten's observation raised no special concerns.

After Corder and Marten presumably left Polstead to get married, Corder returned alone to resume running the family farm, his father and brothers having all died within the span of three years. He assured the Martens that there was only a minor delay in getting the marriage license approved, and in the meantime Maria Marten was staying in Ipswich with a woman named Miss Roland, the sister of an old school chum. For some time, William continued to provide the Martens with "news" from Maria Marten about

¹⁷ "Atrocious Murder of a Young Woman in Suffolk – Singular Discovery of the Body from a Dream – And Apprehension of the Murderer at Ealing, Middlesex," *The Suffolk Herald*, 22 April 1828. Clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

¹⁸ J. Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder...*, (1828), 135-136.

¹⁹ James Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten*, 2nd ed., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 114. Although the main text of the first and second edition matches word for word, the American publisher shortened the title. The page numbers also differ due to the different margins and typefaces, as well as the omission of many of the illustrations included in the original copy. Unless noted as (1828), all Curtis citations are from the 1928 Scribner's edition.

this new bonnet or that trip to the seaside. Even after leaving Polstead for good, ostensibly to live with his supposed wife in London, Corder did not sever all ties, continuing to write letters to the Martens. On 18 October 1827, he wrote to Mr. Marten, “I am just arrived at London upon business... it was [Maria’s] wish to stay at our lodgings in Newport, in the Isle of Wight.”²⁰ After some further correspondence, he sent another letter, stating, “I am going to Portsmouth by this night’s coach.”²¹ He did not, however, go to Portsmouth. Instead, Corder disappeared to Seaforth on the Isle of Wight, where he met a well-educated former governess named Mary Moore, who was vacationing with her overprotective widowed mother and elder brother. Corder and the Moores returned separately to London, and Mary Moore’s mother told *The Suffolk Herald* that “on her return to town they again accidentally met at a pastrycook’s shop in Fleet Street.”²²

Almost immediately after having tea with Mary Moore in Fleet Street, Corder went to a stationer’s shop, where he did something exceedingly odd. He composed a seemingly anonymous advertisement seeking a wife, and had it printed in the *Morning Herald* on November 13 and again in the *Times* on November 25. (The stationer, for his part, kept the ad and the respondents’ letters and published them during the middle of the trial, making a nice income from the sales.) Unexplainably, Mary Moore was among the many ladies answering the ad. Moore and Corder were married approximately three weeks later, less than a year after Maria Marten’s murder. Corder then turned school-

²⁰ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 122. Although Corder urged the Martens to destroy the letters so no one would know of his whereabouts, the letters were preserved and entered into evidence during his trial.

²¹ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 123.

²² “The Murder at Polstead,” *The Suffolk Herald*, [1828?]. Undated clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

master: “He, in conjunction with his wife, kept a boarding-school for females, at the Grove-house, Ealing-lane, Middlesex.”²³ The couple were joined by Mary Moore’s mother and frequently visited by her brother, who was a respectable jeweler.

Back in Polstead, however, Maria Marten’s stepmother began having disturbing dreams concerning her stepdaughter’s fate. The *Mirror* reported that the whole town of Polstead was “only remarkable for their orthodox belief in ghosts and witches,”²⁴ so when she eventually shared her dream she was believed. As the Knight & Lacey pamphlet explained, “Their fears were still more strongly agitated by the mother dreaming, on three successive nights last week, that her daughter had been murdered and buried in the Red Barn... On Saturday morning, the father, with his mole-spade, and a neighbor, with a rake, went to examine the barn.”²⁵ They dutifully poked around in the floor and discovered Marten’s body, buried in a shallow grave. The local surgeon arrived to inspect the body and a policeman was dispatched to find Corder. The local police appealed to the London police, and Officer Pharos Lea quietly arrested Corder at his home on April 22nd, while he was in his dressing gown boiling eggs for breakfast.²⁶ Corder was taken first to the Lambeth Street police office, then to the George Inn, Colchester, where Officer Lea transferred custody to Constable Ayres. When Ayres tried to deposit Corder at the local jail, the governor demanded a warrant specifying commitment to that particular jail, and when none was forthcoming, he denied them

²³ “Horrid Murder,” *John Bull Magazine*, 27 April 1828.

²⁴ “Polstead,” *The Mirror*, [1828?]. Undated clipping in the Law Library Rare Books collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

²⁵ *The Trial of William Corder at the Assizes*, 4-5. The pamphlet here was quoting *The Suffolk Herald* from 22 April, 1828.

²⁶ Curtis, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Mysterious Murder...* (1828), 163.

entrance. Corder was thus forced to spend his first night back in Suffolk sleeping at the George Inn with one arm tied to the bed post and the other attached to Constable Ayres.²⁷ Corder spent the next few months in prison, was put on trial in August of 1828, and was hanged later that month before a huge crowd of spectators.

It seems inarguable that the Red Barn case appealed to a mass audience because of its sensational blend of sex and violence, two subjects that almost always sell well. Press coverage of the Red Barn events began with Corder's arrest in April, arousing considerable public interest. News of his movements "preceded him" as he was being transported to Suffolk, "and immense crowds were collected before the [George] Inn. Lea conducted his prisoner to the room appropriated to the coach passengers... but the crowd was so great, and their anxiety to gain a sight of the prisoner so intense, that the officers deemed it absolutely necessary to remove the prisoner to a place of security."²⁸ Soon every part of the Polstead area would be flooded by visitors.

The three and a half months between William Corder's arrest and his trial did not diminish the public interest, buoyed by constant press reports. A newspaper correspondent wrote from Polstead on July 25th, "Polstead Cherry Fair... was the largest ever known in the memory of man. This increased influx is no doubt owing to the notoriety which the village has obtained in consequence of the late murder of Maria Marten."²⁹ The August trial attracted journalists from across England, from the nearby

²⁷ "Murder at Polstead," *John Bull Magazine*, late edition, 27 April 1828.

²⁸ "Murder at Polstead," *John Bull Magazine*, late edition, 27 April 1828

²⁹ "Polstead," 25 July 1828. Unidentified clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Suffolk Herald to the *London Times*. The pamphleteers who published booklets about the trial wrote that visitors came from as far away as Scotland.

The night before Corder's highly publicized trial was to begin, "such was the influx of visitors to Bury that many had to pay a guinea for a single bed, or to take no bed at all."³⁰ The fact that reporters could get into the court room the following day may have been a small miracle. The pamphlet *Red Barn Tragedy!* informs its readers that "though every exertion was made... to facilitate the ingress of reporters, yet for a time they proved fruitless, and it was only by being actually hauled over the barriers that they reached the place allotted to them."³¹ Another enterprising pamphleteer informed his readers, "The Court could not possibly allow of the admission of a tenth of the multitude." This pamphlet printer, T.D. Dutton, hired reporters to step outside with copy every half-hour, which "enabled me to produce to the world the present account with the extraordinary dispatch announced, viz., two hours from the breaking up of the Court."³² To use a modern press term, Dutton "scooped" the other papers and pamphleteers this way, but he was by no means the only game in town. The inside cover of the Knight & Lacey pamphlet quoted the *Times* from August 12th: "Five hundred copies of Knight & Lacey's edition of the Trial were sold in Bury within a few hours after their arrival from London."³³ A poem supposedly authored by William Corder was printed on multiple broadsides and ballad sheets and circulated throughout England for years. The most famous printing was from James (Jemmy) Catnach. Catnach located his shop in Seven

³⁰ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 83.

³¹ *Red Barn Tragedy!*, 3.

³² T.D. Dutton, "To The Reader," in *A Correct Report...* 3.

³³ *The Trial of William Corder at the Assizes...* front cover.

Dials, an unsavory London neighborhood “long notorious as the fount of sensational, often salacious, and in any event extremely cheap ‘literature for the people’.” As Richard Altick colorfully explains in *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, “A shifting complement of decrepit, gin-thirsty authors, ‘The Seven Bards of Seven Dials’ as they were called, concocted the texts.” Catnach’s biographer, Charles Hindley, claimed that Catnach and his fellow Seven Dials printers together sold about 1,650,000 pieces on the Red Barn case alone.³⁴ Catnach ran his shop from 1813 to 1838, during the ballad’s heyday, but printers across England made the Corder ballad widely available years after the trial ended.³⁵

The effects of the media coverage did not go unnoticed in the court record. One reporter related, “The Coroner objected to our reporter taking notes.”³⁶ Corder’s attorneys also raised concerns while examining parish leader William Chaplin on the witness stand.

[Attorney] “Did you hear the parson preach in or near the barn?”

[Chaplin] “No, certainly not, but I heard of the occurrence.”

[Attorney] “And you took no steps to prevent it?”

[Chaplin] “No, I did not.”

[Attorney] “Are there not exhibitions going about the neighborhood representing Corder as the murderer?”

[Chaplin] “I have heard so.”

[Attorney] “And you have not interfered to prevent them. Is there not a camera obscura near this very hall at this moment, exhibiting him as the murderer?”

[Chaplin] “There is a camera obscura, I believe, about the streets, but I do not know the nature of the exhibition; neither am I aware that I have any power to prevent them in my own parish, much less in this town.”³⁷

³⁴ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 44, 47.

³⁵ John J. McAleer, “Jemmy Catnach - Catchpenny Czar,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 27, no. 4 (Mar. 1962): 8-9. The Borowitz Collection at Kent State University Libraries has an undated copy of a “Murder of Maria Marten” ballad sheet published by Jackson and Son (late J. Russell) Printers, 21 Moor Street, Birmingham. Russell’s shop printed between 1814 and 1838. Jackson printed from 1840 to 1855. Dates culled from Roly Brown, “Glimpses into the 19th Century Broadside Ballad Trade: No. 22,” *Musical Traditions* (July 2006). Online at http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/bbals_22.htm

³⁶ “Murder at Polstead – Coroner’s Inquest,” [1828?]. Unidentified clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

³⁷ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 121-122.

People did, in fact, flock to hear about the reported “seduction” of young Marten in at least two outdoor religious sermons, delivered revival-style by Rev. Charles Hyatt and Rev. Young, within sight of the infamous barn. Additional sermons, like that given by Rev. Meshach Seaman of Queen’s College, Cambridge, happened in respectable English churches. When Seaman had his speech published in a pamphlet, he added to his title the phrase “On the Occasion of the Execution of William Corder, for Murder,” despite the fact that neither Corder nor Marten appear before page 19 of the 32-page text.³⁸

When he testified, William Corder pleaded, “Dismiss from your minds the horrid and disgusting details which have been circulated by means of the public Press,”³⁹ but the jury returned a guilty verdict. The town prepared for his hanging on 11 August 1828. One pamphlet described it this way: “Persons were assembled around the scaffold, in the paddock, [and] on the south side of the gaol... Seated on a wall, which gave a commanding view of the whole scene, were several ladies, dressed in the first style of fashion... Every building in the neighborhood was covered with occupants, and in one of the adjacent fields were several gentlemen on horseback, expecting the appearance of the prisoner.”⁴⁰ The viewers who flocked to the trial stayed for the execution. It is true that, leading up to the nineteenth century, hangings were frequently viewed by the public as a kind of entertainment, but the sheer number of out of town visitors to Bury astonished contemporary writers.

³⁸ Rev. M. (Meshach) Seaman, *The Privileges of the Righteous and the Woes of the Wicked, A Sermon Delivered in the Parish Church of East Donyland, Sunday Morning, August 17, 1828, and Repeated, by Desire, in the Afternoon of the Same Day at St. Peter’s Church, Colchester, on the Occasion of the Execution of William Corder, for Murder* (Ipswich: S. Piper, 1828).

³⁹ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 160.

⁴⁰ *Red Barn Tragedy!* 35.

The town of Polstead benefited from the overnight influx of site-seers and a tourism industry logically developed, complete with kitsch. As a measure of modern success, “you know you’ve made it when you’re an action figure,”⁴¹ and the participants in the Red Barn event achieved the nineteenth century equivalent. The Staffordshire pottery industry, well known for producing ceramic souvenirs for all occasions, created miniature figurines of both Corder and Marten. Additionally, they manufactured two different versions of hand-painted ceramic Red Barn models. In one version, Marten stands at the door of the barn, while in the other, the yard is full of chickens and cows.⁴²

Some nineteenth century tourists weren’t content to purchase manufactured items. Instead, they found their own souvenirs. After Corder’s death, the hangman’s rope was sold for “a guinea an inch.”⁴³ Despite editorialists’ fears that “the filthy rags which were dug from the grave, and which had been wrapped round the corrupting remains of the poor girl, will all be collected as precious relics,”⁴⁴ Marten’s remains were buried in the Polstead churchyard after the trial. Maria Marten’s tombstone in the Polstead churchyard, however, was chipped away by souvenir-hunters. Similarly, newspaper reports of the area stated that the Red Barn itself “is now, from motives of curiosity, almost torn to pieces...

⁴¹ This is a common phrase. For one appearance, see Patrick Lee, interviewing Ian McKellan, “Interview: The Stars of The Lord of the Rings Trilogy Reach Their Journey's End,” *SciFi Weekly*, 22 Dec 2003, <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/interviews/sfw10522.html>

⁴² Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 107-108. In modern St. Edmundsbury, the Moyses Hall Museum counts one of the cow-and-chickens versions of the Staffordshire figures among their collection. The St. Edmundsbury Borough Council, “The Red Barn Murder: The Exhibits,” <http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/sebc/visit/exhibits.cfm>. The St. Edmundsbury Borough Council official website includes several helpful pages regarding the Red Barn and the tourism industry. Photographs of some of the items in their collections can currently be viewed on line, including a ballad sheet, illustrations of Polstead, pamphlets, articles, a Staffordshire pottery figurine, and a shoe-shaped snuff-box made out of a board torn from the Red Barn.

⁴³ “Points of Horror!!!! Or, The Picturesque of Corder’s Case,” [1828?]. Clipping in the Law Library Rare Books Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴⁴ “Points of Horror!!!! Or, The Picturesque of Corder’s Case,” [1828?].

one side, to the height of five or six feet, is nearly gone.” Some of the boards, ripped from the structure, went into the hands of enterprising entrepreneurs. One man, spotted carrying “a bundle of boards from the barn,” remarked that he planned “to take them to London to make a variety of articles for sale as curiosities.”⁴⁵ One of these curiosities was a snuff-box, a practical item designed for everyday use. The tourists at the Red Barn evidently felt a need to claim ownership of the event in a very personal way, and to carry mementos of their provincial experience with them back to the quintessentially urban city of London. Bury St Edmunds found its own way to preserve and commemorate the events. Although Mary Moore petitioned to have Corder’s body returned to the family after the execution, her request was denied. As was common at the time, Corder’s body was handed over to the surgeon of the local hospital, and was dissected. The public was invited to view the dissection, and the body was separated into a number of pieces. The skull was examined by a phrenologist, Dr. J. Spurzheim, whose dubious (and now discredited) scientific examination led him to conclude that “the natural moral character of such a head is formed by animal feelings, deprived of self-esteem.”⁴⁶ Gruesomely enough, George Creed, the West Suffolk Hospital surgeon, tanned William Corder’s skin and made it into a book binding to recover a first edition copy of James Curtis’s authoritative book, and a plaster cast of Corder’s dead face was turned into a museum bust. The present Moyse’s Hall Museum in Suffolk also retained a portion of Corder’s scalp, while parts of his skeleton were sent to the Hunterian Collection, today exhibited at the Royal College of Surgeons in London.

⁴⁵ “The Red Barn at Polstead,” *The Times* (London), 31 July 1828.

⁴⁶ The St. Edmundsbury Borough Council, “The Red Barn Murder: The Exhibits,” <http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/sebc/visit/exhibits.cfm>

Not every member of British society was willing to join in the souvenir frenzy. An editorial called “Points of Horror!!!! Or, the Picturesque of Corder’s Case,” is by turns clever, disgusted, and angry at the way the case had been handled. The writer was disgusted by the “wild zeal which has been shown to gain possession of every thing which could bring the crime most readily and most forcibly to mind.” The author criticized both the popular reading world and the pamphleteers and illustrators who passed off their impressions of the case: “[Corder’s] atrocity has furnished the bulk of the population with their only literary recreation... It is clear that these caterers of horror do not understand their business; they neither harrow up the feelings with skill nor turn their materials to a moral account.” The editorialist seems to long for a representation that would do justice to the scene: “The rustic beauty, half undressed and half attired in male habiliments, sinking under the murderous grasp of her lover, armed with his pistols, his scimitar, and his gun, on the point of killing his victim, according to the indictment in ten different ways! The very owls would leave the Red Barn at such a scene; and were it well represented, the foaming porter would die in its pot on the table of every public-house.”⁴⁷

The editorialist’s tone in the last part of the article reveals genuine feelings for the events. No matter how much the writer wants to take to task the “morbid curiosity” of the British public, the powerful visual images and passionate elements of the Red Barn crime still hold imaginative sway. It is that same sensibility which would be the focus and goal of the first playwright, West Digges, who first put his version of the events onto the stage in 1828.

⁴⁷ “Points of Horror!!!! Or, The Picturesque of Corder’s Case,” [1828?].

Chapter 2: The Red Barn Story in the East End

As court testimony and crime reporters made clear, the earliest performances of the Red Barn events took place shortly after the apprehension of William Corder and took the forms of camera obscura and booth theatre productions, which largely reduced the story to a series of tableaux scenes. The Polstead Cherry Fair occurred about two weeks prior to Corder's trial. No verdict could have been handed down, but that did not stop the proprietors of popular entertainments from presenting Corder as an unquestionable murderer. The *Times* reported on the theatrical representations on 25 July 1828. The correspondent was probably James Curtis himself; certainly the language is echoed in Curtis's novel-length account of the Red Barn case. Here, Curtis describes the scene in detail:

Among other amusements there were a number of shows, and in two of these there were exhibited theatrical representations of 'The Late Murder of Maria Marten,' which of course attracted considerable attention, and insured to the proprietors a rich harvest. In one of these exhibitions, there was the scene in the 'Red Barn' where the mutilated body was lying on a door on the floor, surrounded by the Coroner and the gentlemen of the Jury as they appeared on Sunday the 20th of April, the day after the fatal discovery took place, and the representations were said to be extremely correct. This ill-timed spectacle was placed for public view within the trumpet-sound of the dwelling of the venerable, care-worn, and almost broken-hearted mother of the alleged perpetrator of the horrid deed, which was deemed extremely improper by the better-informed part of the inhabitants, and by some of them entirely condemned... There was no magisterial interference on the subject. In the course of the day, however, the showmen received a message from Mrs. Corder, warning them of the consequences if they made an improper use of the name of her son; and the caution appeared to be attended to, but the public were as well acquainted with the innuendos which were thrown out as though the real name had actually been used. In addition

to these exhibits, there were ballad-singers with songs connected to the Polstead murder, where the name of Corder was unfairly introduced, considering that at the time he was awaiting trial.⁴⁸

The great majority of Curtis's own narrative is thoughtfully constructed, factually correct, and well researched. Curtis was a writer for the London *Times*, and his specialty was murder trials. He became well known to courthouse and jailhouse authorities, and was granted exceptional access to prisoners in over one hundred cases, especially those at London's Old Bailey.⁴⁹ When news of the Red Barn case broke, he hurried to Polstead with the other reporters. What set him apart was his choice to remain in Polstead and conduct his own journalistic research into the case. His book on the Red Barn case was his only literary work, and it is thorough, but it is also colored by a heavily melodramatic hand and is unabashedly full of his own opinions and the opinions of those with whom he agreed. In this vein, he praised the reverends who came to preach sermons on the moral downfall of poor Maria, and criticized those who reworked the events merely for entertainment. "It is much to be lamented, though not to be wondered at, that advantage should be taken of this excitement of feeling by mercenary individuals for the mere purpose of gain."⁵⁰ Curtis unwittingly reveals his own uneasy relationship with the spectacles. In order to write his first-person account of the theatrical scene, he went to see it himself. The representation of the corpse was said to be "correct," and yet Curtis condemns both the proprietors and the spectators who attended to gawk, not to learn.

⁴⁸ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 55-56.

⁴⁹ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 29.

⁵⁰ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 55.

It is therefore surprising that near the end of Curtis's account, he willingly, even happily, introduces a dramatization of the case. Anticipating some resistance from his readers, he admits, "It may very likely appear an incongruity of no inconsiderable magnitude by many of our readers... and why connect the stage with the pulpit may be the interrogatory? We answer that our aim being to turn to moral account the History we have compiled, we are careless from what source we obtain information and observations which may be subservient to that great object."⁵¹ Curtis's "great object," as he articulated it, was the moral education of the public. The play he attended achieved this goal. "We have perused a melodrama called *The RED BARN, or the Mysterious Murder*, and have witnessed its stage effects at the Royal Pavilion, Mile-End Road; we consider the piece admirably got up, and creditable to the talents of Mr. West Digges, the author."⁵²

The Royal Pavilion was a small theatre situated in present-day London. In today's London, Whitechapel Road quickly becomes Mile End Road as one travels east from the city center and into the East End, an area with a long history of its own. Mile End New Town became an independent area in 1690 when Mile End Old Town reached an agreement with the growing population next door. The two areas were separated by the aptly named Common Sewer, a modified natural waterway. Theatre-goers in the early decades of the nineteenth century might have had to navigate around sections of sewer that still ran, uncovered, through town. Mile End seems to have been a raucous and ever-changing landscape, heavily rebuilt throughout the nineteenth century. In the early decades, it was common to see homes one-window wide and three stories tall built side-by-side on fifteen-foot-wide plots of land. Old hunting grounds, natural marshes, and

⁵¹ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 278.

⁵² Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 279.

farm plots were replaced by docks, which often employed starving day laborers, and workshops, most for smelly tanning and wool-treatment industries. Jewish immigrants and displaced London poor made up most of the population. Churches, schools, and almshouses were established throughout the East End communities.⁵³ Mile End was never far divorced from its neighbor to the south, Whitechapel, which was already considered part of London itself by the nineteenth century, regardless of where the actual, shifting city limit might fall.⁵⁴

The Royal Pavilion was opened by Wyatt and Farrell on Whitechapel Road, Mile-End. The first performances appear to date from November of 1828, making the Red Barn melodramas among the theatre's earliest programs. In fact, plays with criminal action at the center became the Royal Pavilion's choice material, as "this playhouse was known for 'Newgate melodrama.'"⁵⁵ The term "Newgate" became, in the early nineteenth century, a general word identifying any material pertaining to real British criminals. The most popular "Newgate" item was the *Newgate Calendar* itself, which debuted in the eighteenth century and had become, by the nineteenth century, an iconic mainstay of London print culture. Originally a record of the inmates held at London's Newgate prison, the calendar became so surprisingly popular that it was "relaunched" and "marketed as a means of teaching children the ultimate price that would be paid for

⁵³ F. H. W. Sheppard, ed., "Mile End New Town," *Survey of London, vol 27: Spitalfields and Mile End New Town* (London: Athlone Press, 1957), 265-288. Portions also available online at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=50179>

⁵⁴ Whitechapel was already well-known as a somewhat unsavory area and was vaulted to international fame in the last decades of the nineteenth century as the sight of the Jack the Ripper murders.

⁵⁵ Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker, "A Guide to London Theatres, 1750-1880," *The Revels History of Drama in English* vol. 6. London: Methuen & Co: 1975. lvii.

sins against society and God.”⁵⁶ The majority of Newgate entries provided a shockingly vivid yet heavily moralized account of the criminal’s evil deeds and summed up the events of any ensuing trial and, whenever possible, the criminal’s sentence as well. Considered educational family reading and sensational entertainment all rolled into one, the publishers of the *Newgate Calendar* quickly found it profitable to expand its coverage beyond its namesake prison.

West Digges offered his short crime melodrama to a public already primed to accept the story and to a playhouse ready to capitalize on their interest. Richard Altick, in *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, tells his reader, “The minors did all they could with the rich materials provided them by sudden death in the midst of contemporary life. Probably the most successful of the plays based on police news was the ‘Red Barn’ drama which, in many versions, held the boards for a full hundred years... But Maria’s story seems never to have been admitted to the respectable stage. ‘No theatre with a reputation to lose,’ says a modern historian of melodrama, ‘would let him [Corder] be represented on its stage, while every theatre which did exhibit the murder in the Red Barn was packed’.”⁵⁷ It is certain that West Digges did not have the only Red Barn show in town.

The Digges play does not employ a clear and dramatically compelling narrative structure. It feels hastily slapped together. James L. Smith’s simple guidebook, *Melodrama*, could have been describing this play when he said: “There is movement here, but no real progress; a wealth of incident, but a dearth of plot. The structure is episodic. Each situation is more or less self-contained and the dramatist sweeps [the audience] from one thrill to the next without bothering to explain the logical links

⁵⁶ Pedley, “The Theatricality of Provincial Life,” 32.

⁵⁷ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 93.

between them. Often there are none.”⁵⁸ What West Digges did succeed in doing was providing his actors with a script full of deliciously melodramatic characters. Digges felt that it was the actor who made the show a success, as his own published preface makes clear.

But why did Digges have to cobble together the hasty collection of scenes? Until about 1820, English writers of poetry, novels, and plays generally focused on labor-intensive romantic themes. The economic situations of London theatres took a turn for the worse after 1820, and even the venerable Drury Lane was unwilling or unable to pay its best writers even what their contracts demanded. Drury Lane had initially offer 400 pounds to playwright James Kenney for a play called *Masaneillo*, but in 1832 was so bankrupt that Kenney received no money at all, despite the fact that *Masaniello* played for over 150 nights. Edward Bulwer-Lytton did receive 600 pounds at Covent Garden for his play *Richelieu*, but “no other author could command either Bulwer-Lytton’s literary prestige or his fees.” Minor theatres offered their writers a fixed price for a play; the playwright had no hope of receiving benefit performances, copyright protection, or what might now be call royalties on future productions. Playwright Douglas Jerrold had a relatively good position earning five pounds a week as house dramatist for the Surrey Theatre, possibly the most famous minor playhouse. But Jerrold earned a grand total of only 60 pounds for one of the century’s most famous melodramas, *Black Ey’d Susan*.⁵⁹ “The consequences of the low market value of drama after about 1820 or 1830 were obvious,” says melodrama expert Michael Booth. “Authors either had to turn out great

⁵⁸ Smith, *Melodrama*, 24.

⁵⁹ Michael Booth, “The Social and Literary Context,” *Revels History of Drama in English, 1750-1880*. (London: Methuen & Co, 1975), 48-49.

quantities of material very quickly or abandon the drama entirely.... The salary was usually low and the workload heavy.... The only way an author could keep up the monetary pace at the low rates prevailing was feverishly to adapt French plays, work to a few stereotyped situations and characters, steal from popular novels, dramatize newspaper reports of crime, rewrite his own old plays, and borrow liberally from his fellow dramatists. Careful and original work was not encouraged by the prevailing financial circumstances; dramatists *had* to be hacks, willy-nilly.”⁶⁰ The hard-working hack writers churned out melodramas that, not surprisingly, did not hold up well as literary texts and were not preserved in their own day, let alone in modern scholarly circles. “We tend to treat with more respect those texts that are ‘literature’ as well as script,” admits Thomas J. Taylor.⁶¹

Most early melodramas, including the *Red Barn* adaptation by West Digges, do not hold up well to literary scrutiny, despite the fact that they apparently played fantastically well. West Digges is known now only because his name appears on his title page and in James Curtis’ highly specialized book. The title page to *The Red Barn* trumpets Digges’ other achievements: “Author of ‘The Death of Marshal Ney,’ ‘The Fatal Bridge,’ ‘Manfred and Alphonso,’ &c. &c.”⁶² The story of Marshal Ney is almost certainly adapted from the 1815 trial and execution of Napoleon’s loyal military man Marshal Michel Ney, for treason against the rightful king of France. “Manfred and Alphonso” is likely a dramatization based on two characters from *The Castle of Ollada*, a

⁶⁰ Booth, “The Social and Literary Context,” 50.

⁶¹ Thomas J. Taylor, “Cumberland, Kotzebue, Scribe, Simon: Are We Teaching the Wrong Playwrights?” *College English* 43, no. 1 (Jan. 1981): 46.

⁶² West Digges, *The Red Barn, or the Mysterious Murder of Maria Marten* (London: Teulon and Fox, 1828), 2.

romance written by Francis Lathom and published in 1795. The subject of “The Fatal Bridge” is anyone’s guess. West Digges appears to be just another hack writer, furiously adapting popular novels and recent events for the melodramatic stage. The fact that Digges’s earlier plays do not seem to exist in print today should not surprise the scholar. In the case of the Red Barn, at least, his subject endured; his fame did not.

It is West Digges’s take on the Red Barn events that comprises the oldest printed script accessible today. The Digges script, now resting in the Rare Books collection at the Law Library, Library of Congress, was originally published in the Whitechapel district of London in 1828. The script is short by modern standards, filling just 24 pages, and it is hard to imagine such a short piece acting as the centerpiece for the theatre’s evening bill, although to my knowledge no playbills or advertisements list exactly what position this particular play occupied. If Digges’s title page is to be believed, his play was “acted upwards of Forty Nights at the Royal Pavilion.”⁶³

The Royal Pavilion audience, presumably already familiar with the basic subject material, was greeted by the interior of the Marten cottage.⁶⁴ William Corder arrives at the cottage and tells Maria that he has made wedding arrangements, all the while secretly plotting her murder. William receives Mr. Marten’s blessing. Maria reveals that she has recently had a baby out of wedlock, and for this reason she is afraid that she could be arrested. William provides her with some male clothing to use as a disguise, then leaves for the Red Barn, their rendezvous point. The play’s comic subplot is immediately established when the country lad Timothy Bobbin enters and proposes marriage to Maria’s lively sister Anne. Once Maria is disguised, she and Anne share sweet parting

⁶³ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 1.

⁶⁴ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 5.

words. Returning with a ring, Tim comes upon the scene, mistakenly thinks that Maria is a real man, and concludes that Anne is cheating on him. The sisters playfully have a laugh at his expense before Anne reveals the truth. Maria goes to the Red Barn, expecting a wedding ring. Instead, William tells her, “Thou’st set a scorpion here... I am desperate in my thoughts, and thirst for blood.... Tis vain, thou dyest [sic].”⁶⁵ At this point, Maria tries to run away and William shoots her. She falls to the floor and dies. “The curtain descends slowly,” marking the end of the first act.⁶⁶

In the second act, Maria’s elderly mother, Dame Marten, dreams that William is burying Maria’s body in the Red Barn. Dame Marten awakes in a panic. Mr. Marten and Anne are trying to calm her when her son George enters and announces he has seen William Corder walking through the fields, alone, with a pick-axe. Some time elapses, and Anne admits that the family has started to worry about Maria. Meanwhile, William coerces a country lad named Johnny to travel to London and interview some ladies who have responded to William’s advertisement seeking a wife. Meanwhile, the Martens discover Maria’s body, and considerable grieving ensues. An officer of the law locates William, now living in London, inexplicably but happily married to a lady whose own brother is eager to vouch for William’s good character. The next scene features several peasants discussing William’s guilty sentence, and the final scene takes place in William’s jail cell the night before his execution where Maria’s ghost appears. William repents, confesses his sins, then faints into the arms of the jailer as the curtain falls.

James Curtis’s assertion that this play was introduced specifically as a moral account neatly sidesteps the historical and factual inaccuracies still glaringly evident one

⁶⁵ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 15.

⁶⁶ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 15.

hundred eighty years later. There are at least thirty-five people who appeared in court to testify about the murder and related events, so Digges would have had to eliminate most of the people and their often complex relationships just to make the play reasonably clear. Even the characters presented on stage are substantially altered, and other characters have been invented all together.

Digges presents Maria as both heroine and victim. Maria is young and pretty. She has the most respectable of wishes: “To get married to the man who alone can make you happy.”⁶⁷ Her situation is slightly unusual in that she has already lost her innocence and respectability by having a child out of wedlock prior to the opening scene, an issue Digges presents mainly through hints and allusions. The sweet country lass appears guilty of a single moral lapse; William is presented as her only sexual partner. As Léon Metayer describes it, the average melodramatic woman finds herself in a position “of weakness; she is dependent on her surroundings.” The biggest menace she faces in life appears in the form of a man.⁶⁸ William Corder acts as her seducer, the father of her child, and her murderer. Naïve Maria, however, merely sees him as a man treated unkindly by the world, and she sees her elopement as a “wild romantic project.” After their marriage, she is sure she can use her womanly charms to bring William’s dark frowns “sunshine,” saying, “I shall prove the means whereby that heart shall be restor’d.”⁶⁹ Although the sympathetic figures in melodrama often have an innate sense of value, goodness, and human nature that has nothing to do with education, Maria is blind

⁶⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 5.

⁶⁸ Léon Metayer, “What the Heroine Taught, 1830-1870,” trans. Michael Hays, in *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), 237.

⁶⁹ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 9-11.

to William's true nature, convinced, "I know his nature, open as his heart, will never rest, till he secures that peace he has destroyed."⁷⁰ Digges guides the audience to believe that Maria's "destroyed" peace is the tranquil, virtuous life she would have led, had she not had an affair with William. Unlike the classic melodrama heroine who struggles to resist the villain, Maria is smitten by him, and her desire to amend for her past moral lapse drives her further into his arms.

The role of villain is clearly filled by the character of William Corder. From the beginning of Digges's play, there is no doubt how the audience is supposed to react to him. Scarcely three lines into the dialogue, young George Marten provides the first impartial observation of William's nature: "For my part I think him a nasty sulky fellow."⁷¹ The audience might be aware of the facts of the actual event, but Digges's play also directs the audience in a not-too-subtle way to accept the opinions of this truthful country child over those of his smitten sister. Minutes later, William Corder enters and is allowed, in quick succession, two asides and a soliloquy which begin to reveal his dastardly plan: "The deed were bloody sure, but I will do't, and rid me of this hated plague, her very shadow moves a scorpion in my sight; I loathe the banquet I have fed upon!"⁷² In front of the Martens, William Corder puts up an outward show of tenderness, but his asides reveal his true intentions to the lucky audience. The moral message is driven home even more explicitly in the final scene. Although the classic melodrama villain may be unrepentant, William goes through a sort of death-bed conversion. In the final scene, William announces, "This bosom is a waste, – a wilderness, – a blank in the

⁷⁰ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁷¹ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 5.

⁷² Digges, *The Red Barn*, 6.

creation; – sin, fell, remorseless sin, hath blighted it and left me desolate... a short, short hour, and, oh, the great account I have to render.”⁷³ William has imperiled his immortal soul. He offers little in the way of motivation. Like all the other characters in this play, William is comprised of feeling, desire, and emotion. Rationale and purpose are handled only secondarily.

Since the audience is deprived of a redeemable victim and cannot identify with the villain, with whom are they to sympathize? The audience is instructed by way of noble tears. As David Grimsted observed, “Emotional sensibility was the real criterion for virtue, and crying became its testament.... Tears were the sure sign of inner virtue.”⁷⁴ Maria’s perfectly loving family is constantly in tears. Mr. Marten, giving his emotional blessing to the marriage of Maria and William, reminds them, “The poor old father’s tears will cease to flow, when gazing on his children, and his little household happy all around him.”⁷⁵ This “sympathize with the crying old father” directive was used at least as early as 1820 when W. T. Moncrieff’s *The Lear of Private Life* was produced at the Coburg Theatre, where the beleaguered father’s appearance is, pointedly, “musically accompanied by Handel’s ‘Tears such as tender fathers shed.’ ”⁷⁶ There is no shame when Mr. Marten completely breaks down upon the discovery of his daughter’s body. He

⁷³ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 27.

⁷⁴ David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 11. Although Grimsted’s book deals primarily with melodrama in America, the cross-Atlantic exchange of literature and drama and the cultural similarities between the English and Americans mean that many of his excellent observations apply to British melodrama as well.

⁷⁵ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 10.

⁷⁶ Robertson Davies, “Playwrights and Plays,” *The Revels History of Drama in English, 1750-1880*. (London: Methuen and Co., 1975.) 215.

cries, “But she! she was the darling of my age, the prop of my existence, the hope which blest me.”⁷⁷ Tears flow throughout his scene.

Rather than showing Maria’s youthful step-mother, Digges writes Dame Marten as Maria’s natural mother and also makes her an elderly, matronly figure. Dame Marten also dissolves into tears when Maria’s murder is discovered. Dutiful, weeping Anne even enlists her fiancé Timothy, who offers to “Do all within his power to assist in the discovery and ease the sorrows of a mother’s heart.”⁷⁸ Such heartbreak suffered by the virtuous and elderly parents could only serve to re-enforce the moral lessons so central to this melodrama’s purpose and popularity.

Although he makes much of the tearful, tragic moments, Digges does not allow his entire play to wallow in sorrow. He inserts a comforting, humorous assortment of country bumpkins to ameliorate all the crying. Despite the fact that all of the play’s central characters are from a provincial setting, the comic characters exhibit a rough language and humor which clearly sets them on a lower rung of the social ladder. David Grimsted observes that “all low-comedy stereotypes were presented on stage with some condescension as well as much affection.”⁷⁹ This certainly seems to be the case with Digges’s comic couple. Maria’s sister is re-written to be a playful, saucy girl with a completely fictional fiancé. Montagu Slater, a twentieth-century editor of Victorian melodrama, told his readers, “Tim Bobbin lacks description, because just as we might say ‘a Buster Keaton’ part, a Victorian manager would say ‘a Tim Bobbin part.’ Tim became

⁷⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 23.

⁷⁸ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 20.

⁷⁹ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 194.

the prototype of all comic countrymen.”⁸⁰ Tim and Anne banter and joke about their life together. Anne teases him and rebuffs his attempts to kiss her, saying he must learn not to be “so rumbustical when there’s no occasion.”⁸¹ Although he speaks sensibly enough when proposing, his grammar quickly slips when he thinks he sees Anne with another man: “Dang me if he beant going to run away wi’ her.... Dang’d if he ar’nt a regular bantem cock, he’ll shoot un if I say much,” he announces to the audience.⁸²

Besides simple comic relief, Tim and Anne provide a fascinating and deliberate counterpoint to the Maria/William relationship. In the first scene between the two, Tim admits, “In the first place, I love thee most confoundedly, and in the naxt, I’ll run away with thee directly.”⁸³ Soon after this, William also proposes to Maria, but their pending elopement is much less joyful. William says, “Everything is settled, let us not delay the time... the Magistrates they say are on the watch, we must be careful to elude them.”⁸⁴ The scene between William and Maria revolves around the serious details of their escape plan, with Maria agreeing to each of William’s assertions. Anne, on the other hand, is not to be taken for granted. She refuses Tim’s original proposition, saying, “What, whether I will or no?... I’ll let you know I have a will of my own, and I’d like to see the woman that has not.”⁸⁵ Anne actively negotiates the terms of their relationship, nearly leaving him when he neglects to make his commitment crystal clear.

⁸⁰ Montagu Slater, “Introduction,” in *Maria Marten, or Murder in the Red Barn*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann Education Books Ltd, 1971), xiv.

⁸¹ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁸² Digges, *The Red Barn*, 11.

⁸³ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁸⁴ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 10.

Later, as Maria exits her parents' house dressed in male disguise, Tim sees Anne and Maria embrace and becomes angrily jealous of his "rival." Anne lets him rant and rave, and they exchange a series of comic "good-byes," each more ridiculous than the last, although neither one are leaving. The good-byes escalate until Tim threatens to "drink a gallon of poison," and Anne shouts back, "And I'll go home and stab myself with a long sword; good bye to you, good bye."⁸⁶ Some audience members might have been stuck by this exchange, had they stopped laughing long enough to think about it. The criminal court counted a sword among the murder weapons supposedly used against Marten, and Corder's ultimate defense centered on a love-sick Marten committing suicide when Corder announced he was leaving her. Digges must have known he was able to rely on strong comic actors to give them a lover's quarrel complete with death threats, and still expect them to make the audiences laugh. The actors seem to have succeeded. In his preface, Digges writes, "To Mrs. Beverly, the Author feels highly indebted, her fascinating naivette [sic], in the simple and playful Anne, was warmly and deservedly appreciated."⁸⁷

Even given that the parts for Anne and Tim are comic and therefore not to be taken too seriously, Anne demonstrates a markedly different sensibility than Maria. Maria plunges ahead on her wild romantic project, while Anne discusses not just romantic marriage, but responsible courtship, personal commitment, and the details of their future home life. Even assuming Tim is not as charming as the seductive William, Anne is less willing than her sister to give in to her sweetheart in any way. It is possible

⁸⁵ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁸⁶ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 13.

⁸⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 3.

that Anne's sub-plot is designed merely to offer an alternative version of events. *If* Maria had fallen in love with a country boy, and *if* she had told him to keep his hands off, and *if* he would have eagerly bought a golden wedding ring, *then* Maria, too, could have experienced the happiness Tim and Anne have planned when they present a duet: "We'll retire to a snug little cottage of our own, get plenty of sheep, but no horned cattle... how happy we shall be, with a little chubby babe dandling on the knee, and what a comfortable farm we'll keep."⁸⁸ West Digges worked from source material that was genuinely rooted in the agricultural, provincial world, but he spins his tale with an understanding of the urban labor classes most likely to frequent an East End theatre. "The theme of lost innocence, of a vanished rural heritage, of a dimly remembered and already mythicized Garden of Eden, as expressed by the purely symbolic world of the village of melodrama, is very strong in the theatre from the 1820s," writes Michael Booth.⁸⁹ His observation helps explain why Digges presents Polstead, and Tim and Anne, as he does.

Tim and Anne, though both in love and clever enough to handle their own future happiness, do not make any real attempts to step outside of a traditional mode of life. Fascinatingly, in the scene immediately before the discovery of Maria's body, Tim tells the audience he has had no luck finding Maria. "I do think she's gone – god knows where; well it all comes of her putting on the breeches so soon, and I'll take care of that when I'm married, Miss Anne don't jockey me that way." He repeats his verdict to Anne: "It all comes of her wearing the breeches." This sentiment is so inappropriate that Anne calls him a "good-for-nothing heartless fellow."⁹⁰ What forces were at work in the world

⁸⁸ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 8.

⁸⁹ Booth, "A Defence of Nineteenth Century English Drama," 11.

to explain Tim's preoccupation with Maria's "wearing the breeches?" Could it be a literal concern? In order to free women from the ills and pains of tight lacing and cumbersome skirts, Elizabeth Miller developed new clothing designs in the nineteenth century that were adopted and publicized by Amelia Bloomer. However, Miller's famous "bloomers" were developed in 1851 and West Digges's play is much too early to be addressing this specific concern. It is much more likely that both Miller and Digges were responding in very different ways to larger forces at work in the world, but what? It does not appear that 1828 was a particularly important milestone in the women's rights movement, but such groups had already begun to form. Mary Wollstonecraft's famous feminist treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had already circulated for thirty-four years, having been published in 1794. The separation of "family" and "society" during this period led to the firm establishment of "private" and "public" spheres, with women relegated to the private world. The voting rights movement was just getting underway. Feminist scholar Ellen du Bois asserts that "the significance of the woman suffrage movement rested precisely on the fact that it by-passed women's oppression within the family... and demanded instead her admission to citizenship."⁹¹ The British women's suffrage movement gained steam in the 1820s, but would fight for over a hundred years, earning the right to vote only in 1918. Women, in the early part of the nineteenth century, were part of a legal system that withheld a number of rights, including property ownership, divorce, control of medical treatment, custody of her own children, and high-paying jobs. Anne, it is true, does assert control over her situation and her physical space. When Tim's

⁹⁰ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 19.

⁹¹ Ellen du Bois, "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (Autumn, 1975): 63.

stage directions say “attempts to kiss her,” Anne responds: “Hands off, if you please.”⁹² But Anne cannot be reduced to a new, proto-feminist, self-possessed woman. In fact, she has done just what would be most appropriate for any young virtuous woman facing an over-eager suitor. This morally instructive play thus follows the same line of reasoning as the minister of Ebenezer Chapel, Shadwell, who preached an outdoor sermon at the Red Barn 17 August 1828, aiming much of his commentary specifically at the girls present. “Fornication, called, and justly called, in the Prayer book of the Church of England, deadly sin, is increasing among the poor in the villages... O young females, time was that your mothers and grandmothers possessed almost so much chastity as the middling or the higher ranks of society!”⁹³ The obvious class bias aside, the reverend’s speech places the sole responsibility for chastity on the young women. Anne is almost ideal. The adjectives most applied to nineteenth-century women supported the idea that the perfect woman was, among other things, pure, devoted, and domestic. In Digges’s fictional world, respectable Anne thwarts Tim’s desire: “I think I’d better extinguish that blaze before it goes any further.”⁹⁴ Familial Anne cares for her aged parents: “Your poor Anne will comfort you, do all she can to make you happy.”⁹⁵ Domestic Anne decides on a future as a wife and mother, as the aforementioned “snug little cottage” duet indicates. But the worldly Maria has transgressed several boundaries. She has committed fornication, and gotten caught at it. She has worn the breeches, figuratively and literally. Her downfall appears to come from her attempts to live outside the acceptable cultural norms.

⁹² Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁹³ Quoted in Montagu Slater, “Introduction,” *Maria Marten, or Murder in the Red Barn*, 2nd ed. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1971. viii.

⁹⁴ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

⁹⁵ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 24.

Anne Marten and Tim Bobbin are not the only rustic, stereotypical, comic characters in Digges's melodrama. In Digges's story, William employs a man named "Johnny Rawbold" to travel to London and hold wife interviews. At the London inn, Rawbold asks for "Mister Waiter," and is told the waiter is "call'd plain John." For the rest of the scene, he refers to the waiter as "Plain John." The interview for a wife begins with Tabitha, who Rawbold believes has money and property. When she explains, "I lived with that family, as Cook, five and twenty years," Rawbold exclaims, "Cook, the devil," to which Tabitha characteristically replies, "No sir, I never cooked the devil."⁹⁶ Johnny Rawbold is another completely fictional invention. Digges addresses a portion of his published preface to the actors portraying Bobbin and Rawbold, respectively: "To Mr. Conquest and Mr. Wyman, in whose hands, parts, insignificant in themselves, at once ceased to be so, the Author feels highly indebted."⁹⁷ The recognition that the comic, rustic figures were not actually essential to the primary plot may say a lot about the way the work-a-day dramatic world functioned. The comic actors' abilities to take otherwise thankless roles and make them memorable relies on a skill set beyond the scripted dialogue.

With so many creative additions and interpolations, how could West Digges maintain his story's authority and authenticity? Although earning a living was probably Digges's chief concern, a close second seems to have been establishing authenticity for his play. His preface claims his play is drawn from "a Work, now publishing by T. Kelly, Paternoster Row... containing the clearest, most interesting, and copious account," and he praises the actors who "truly conceive" the characters. He even apologizes for the fact

⁹⁶ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 20-22.

⁹⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 3.

that one actor, Mr. Vaughn, is “not in appearance a proper representation of that worthy Officer, Mr. Lee.”⁹⁸ Instead, Digges relies on internal references, some of which are quite obscure. Digges sets the ridiculous wife interview specifically at “Bull Inn, Leadenhall Street,”⁹⁹ a site that appears in the court records as one of Corder’s London lodgings and the clear address line on one of his letters to the Marten family. The letter, admitted to court’s evidence, was printed in its entirety in Curtis’s book. The address line read “London, Bull Inn, Leadenhall-street, Thursday, 18th Oct.”¹⁰⁰ Digges’s script contains a number of other such superfluous references to real people and places. In the actual trial, Phoebe Stowe testified that she had loaned Corder first a spade and then a pickaxe on the evening of the murder.¹⁰¹ In Digges’s script, young George Marten announces to his fainting mother, “I saw William just now going through the field which leads to Phoebe Stowe’s cottage with a pickaxe ’cross his shoulder.” George’s further notes, “He had his velveteen jacket on,”¹⁰² a remark calculated to coincide with the details of Corder’s confession, when the condemned man wrote, “I took the pistol from the side pocket of my velveteen jacket.”¹⁰³ For those familiar with the highly publicized story and the published confession, the inclusion of the velveteen jacket and Phoebe Stowe’s proper name lent Digges’s script a certain measure of authenticity. For someone reading the script 180 years later, without additional reference material, the jacket is a minor detail

⁹⁸ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 3-4. The “Work” from Paternoster Row is James Curtis’s account.

⁹⁹ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 122.

¹⁰¹ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 223.

¹⁰² Digges, *The Red Barn*, 17.

¹⁰³ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 223.

and the singular instance of name-dropping for Phoebe Stowe is more confusing and pointless than anything else. Of course, West Digges could hardly have had any idea that his 28-page murder melodrama would be read, enjoyed, and examined after such a great lapse of time.

Digges's writing style is exactly what one expects of an early "hack writer," a specialist in hasty true-crime dramatizations. His spelling is consistent, but he plays fast and loose with all sorts of punctuation marks. William's fourteen-line soliloquy at the opening of scene two includes twelve exclamation marks, three question marks, three commas, two dashes, one semicolon, and only one period.¹⁰⁴ It may be that these punctuation marks provide clues to an actor on how to perform the piece; melodramas, after all, were meant to be seen and heard, not read. Still, "clumsy construction is characteristic of the earliest melodrama,"¹⁰⁵ and Digges's work is no exception. Bound more or less to follow the historical chain of events, while compressing the action into a very brief show, he condenses some events and leaps over great spans of time to move his audience from one milestone to the next. Old Dame Marten dreams of Maria's death, young George sees William in the fields with a pickaxe, and Farmer Marten goes to inspect the Barn all in a span of two pages.¹⁰⁶ Seven pages later, William appears at breakfast and is afforded the longest monologue in the play, just so he can catch the audience up on everything that has ostensibly happened between scenes, including his meeting and marrying another woman.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Davies, "Playwrights and Plays," 205.

¹⁰⁶ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 24.

The one thing this play lacks is an easily defined hero, a problem that plagues many crime melodramas. None of the Polstead characters have the necessary greatness, the undivided sense of selfless devotion, or the myopically lofty ideals typical of a melodramatic hero. Maria cannot fill the hero role because of her emotional weakness, fallen nature, and early death. Timothy and the other simple figures lack the courage and convictions a hero must carry. The parents, taken together, could form a heroic type. They discover Maria's body and vow to have revenge upon the murderer, but they disappear from the play altogether a full three scenes before the end. In her article titled "*Maria Marten, or the Murder in the Red Barn: The Theatricality of Provincial Life*," Catherine Pedley gives William Corder the title of "anti-hero," which is appealing since William does come off as the central character. But where the average hero spends a lot of time posturing and reacting, William acts decisively.

The only remaining hero candidate is the unsung Officer of the Law, Mr. Lee. He arrives at William's doorstep as he is sitting down to breakfast and, after a pointless series of inane questions, announces, "It becomes my painful duty to tell you, that I have a warrant to arrest you on a charge of murder!"¹⁰⁸ He is far from the revenging angel that Maria's grieving father had longed for. Even more troublesome, he appears upon the stage only after the play is three-quarters finished and has a sum total of only twenty lines, many of which are of a short "just the facts" nature which would make *Dragnet's* Joe Friday proud. Perhaps Office Lee is most disqualified because he is never seen to struggle against any opposing forces, something central to the hero's dramatic adventure. Even William does not attempt to resist arrest.

¹⁰⁸ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 25.

Although he had tried to disappear into the urban landscape, William is apprehended in London. It is no coincidence that both the historical and fictional William Corder moved to London after completing his crime. London's population boomed in the nineteenth century. The long-held assumption has been that the crime rates also increased dramatically. Writing in 1845, Friedrich Engels announced, "The clearest indication of the unbound contempt of the workers for the existing social order is the wholesale manner in which they break its laws... Consequently, the incidence of crime has increased with the growth of the working-class population and there is more crime in Britain than in any other country in the world."¹⁰⁹ Engels' conclusion was that crime rose at a rate six times higher than the corresponding population rate. In those early years, England was just beginning to establish an organized system of policing and statistical reporting regarding crime. Modern statisticians now argue that the apparent increase in crime was mainly due to better and more systematic reporting methods employed during the first part of the century, and that there was an actual drop in crime after the 1850s. In light of this research, long-held assumptions about crime in the nineteenth-century metropolis begin to fall apart. Regardless of what the statistics tell modern scholars, however, the *belief* among the nineteenth-century denizens of London was that crime was rising and the urban world was growing more dangerous.

Of course, there were murders long before there were journalists to cover them or dramatists to adapt them. It seems unlikely that the Red Barn story could have achieved

¹⁰⁹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. William O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 145. Quoted in Lynn McDonald, "Theory and Evidence of Rising Crime in the Nineteenth Century," *The British Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 3 (Sept. 1982): 410-411. McDonald points out that Engels deliberately employed a Marxist line of thought to link crime and class struggle. This was not unique to England; a similar treatment was carried out in France by Paul Lafargue when he described the period of 1840-1886, despite the fact that the statistical evidence on crime was available to him, and actually contradicts his argument.

infamy without the aid of the popular press of the period, or that the popular press could have grown so rapidly if it had not been able to capitalize on a consumer market for true-crime literature. There were several developments in the nineteenth century that helped to keep the Red Barn story in the public eye. John Cawleti, in laying the groundwork for his study in crime films, discusses the popularization of crime literature. He claims that literature and entertainment arts underwent a major shift in the nineteenth century, “from an essentially religious or moral feeling about crime to what might best be called an aesthetic approach to the subject. The classical detective story is the fullest embodiment of this attitude because it treats crime as an entertainment, the cycle of crime and punishment becoming the occasion for a pleasurable, highly formal and controlled intellectual and emotional stimulation... We are more interested in the form of the crime and process of its solution than in the sinfulness of the criminal and his punishment.” The move from the moral, religious framework to one of controlled aesthetics made it possible for a certain class of melodramas to romanticize the outlaw hero and for a new scientific and social approach to empirical investigation, analysis, and legal reforms.¹¹⁰ Although I do not think that the aesthetic framework fully replaced the moral and religious proscriptions held, at least passively, by a great swath of the nineteenth-century British population, this does help explain why London’s residents flocked to murder melodramas, the Red Barn case among them. Digges’s script does not end with the murderer’s apprehension. The audience can be satisfied by holding, as the play ends, not only the murderer’s confession and genuine prayer for God’s mercy, but also the assurance that promises of earthly justice will be fulfilled at the gallows.

¹¹⁰ John G. Cawleti, “The New Mythology of Crime,” *boundary 2* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1975): 329-340.

Chapter 3: The Red Barn Story Goes to Wales

On Monday, 6 April 1840, the Marylebone Theatre presented their version of the Red Barn story, placing it at the very beginning of the evening. Traditionally, theatres were expected to offer lightweight theatrical fore-pieces and afterpieces that bookended the main course of the evening theatrical menu, all separated by song-and-dance interludes. The Marylebone advertisement announced, instead, “The performance to commence with a Drama, in Two Acts, entitled *THE RED BARN*.” The full bill for the Marylebone’s Monday evening is fascinating in and of itself, offering a long list of entertainments, including a Neopolitan Hornpipe, the “English Paganini,” a comic fandango, and two other plays: “the Laughable Farce of *Matrimony*” and “*KORAC*.” The same actors would appear again, as the bottom of the advertisement promised, “Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday” in *Zembuca*, *The Farce of Married Life!!!*, and *The Last Struggle!!!*¹¹¹ What makes the Marylebone order of performance doubly interesting is that, at least for the week of 6 April 1840, the middle piece of each evening was to be a farce about married life.

It seems appropriate here to note that in 1828, when the Red Barn trial first entered the London consciousness, Douglas Jerrold authored a short piece entitled *Wives by Advertisement*, presented at the Royal Coburg Theatre in 1828.¹¹² It should be remembered that William Corder’s matrimonial advertisement was published in 1827. The first ad garnered forty-five replies, and the second earned fifty-four. Curtis’s 1828

¹¹¹ Michael Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 207.

¹¹² Douglas William Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement; or, Courting in the Newspapers*, (London: J. Duncombe, 1828), 1. This script is available in the Rare Books Collections of the Law Library, Library of Congress, Washington DC. It is bound with other Red Barn items and is easily overlooked, since it measures only about 4 inches by 6 inches with the cover closed.

book reprinted the latter set of responses, and Richard Altick is not alone in noticing that these “are of substantial interest to the historian of manners, not least for their copious illustration of the variety of prose styles adopted by pre-Victorian spinsters and widows wishing to intimate, in a modest but unmistakable way, that they were open to offers.”¹¹³ It was probably something of a shock for the public to learn that Mary Moore, the woman who successfully answered Corder’s matrimonial advertisement, was a governess from a respectable family. James Curtis felt compelled to publish six pages extolling her virtues, including her evident familial devotion, education, and religious piety,¹¹⁴ all elements apparently lacking from Marten’s character. Corder himself appears to have been perfectly capable of functioning in Mary Moore’s world, running a boarding school and otherwise “contentedly and effectively occupying the middle-class domestic sphere,” right down to the infamous moment when he was arrested while “minuting” the boiling of some eggs for breakfast, a domestic scene repeated in *Red Barn* plays and the 1841 *New Newgate Calendar* alike. As Catherine Pedley points out in her recent article, the “infiltration by Corder into a bourgeois urban identity, a lifestyle desirably shaped by moral wholesomeness... caused some anxiety.”¹¹⁵ One way to view the press’s tendency to reduce the real Corder to a character type is to see the portrayal as part of their response to this conundrum. The *Bury and Norwich Post* reporter for 6 August 1828 even explained that Corder *looked* like a villain.

¹¹³ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 30.

¹¹⁴ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 291-296.

¹¹⁵ Catherine Pedley, “The Theatricality of Provincial Life,” 35.

The Red Barn story, with its melodramatic villain and victim, seems especially suitable to the Coburg repertoire. The Royal Coburg, opened in 1818, “earned its nickname the ‘Blood Tub’ by featuring melodramas of the most sensational sort.”¹¹⁶ There were certainly other Red Barn plays being produced throughout London in 1828. Curtis notes, “In addition to the representation at the Royal Pavilion, Melodramas and a series of similar pieces were performed at other of the Metropolitan Minor Theatres, one of which was under the title of *Advertisement for Wives*.”¹¹⁷ No play by this exact title seems to have existed, suggesting that Curtis mistakenly rearranged the title words when he was actually referring to Jerrold’s piece, an understandable mistake since the actors in Jerrold’s play repeat the phrase “advertisement for wives” with unnecessary frequency. But Jerrold’s play is not written in the same vein as the Royal Pavilion murder drama.

Jerrold’s play, published as *Wives by Advertisement; or, Courting in the Newspapers*, is “a dramatic satire in one act,”¹¹⁸ not a melodrama like the other Red Barn plays. In fact, *Wives by Advertisement*, although capitalizing on a sensational part of the Corder story, has almost nothing whatsoever to do with the real events of the Marten/Corder case. There are no characters with either the name or disposition of Maria Marten or William Corder, and there is no crime. Instead, this play reads as a farce, complete with characters named “Lovejoke” and “Miss Catchfly.” Although only 22 pages long, the printer gives “Time of Representation, fifty minutes,”¹¹⁹ probably due to

¹¹⁶ Marker, “A Guide to London Theatres,” lii. Despite its sensational reputation, The Royal Coburg also hosted “distinguished performers such as Edmund Kean and Madame Vestris.” The theatre was renamed the Royal Victoria in 1833, and is known today as the Old Vic.

¹¹⁷ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 284.

¹¹⁸ Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement*, 1.

musical interludes. The piece is surprisingly, amusingly accessible today, perhaps because of the prevalence of modern personal ads and online dating services. Below Jerrold's clever humor, however, there is also a serious element to the characters' discussion of the central plot device. "Advertisements for wives!" exclaims Lovejoke, "Why madam, every one of those advertisements is a lime-twig, set in a newspaper to catch the youthful and unwary.... a spring-trap against the quiet and the reputation of honorable families... If husbands, like bonnets, could be worn and cast off again at pleasure, I should see no objection; but, unfortunately, with husbands there is no such change of fashion."¹²⁰

At any rate, any serious commentary is overshadowed by a series of increasingly ridiculous situations. As the play continues, numerous acquaintances are revealed to have used matrimonial advertisements with amusing results, as in the case of "Colonel Straptoo" whose ad was answered only by "Mrs. Doublechin."¹²¹ One character reads aloud a newspaper column presenting the marriage market in a stock-market-report style, and the audience learns there is a "bazaar for husbands – the 'Royal Turtle-dove Love-to-death-and-distraction Bazaar.'"¹²² Even Miss Broomblossom, a disapproving elderly aunt, becomes caught up in the matrimonial madness. Although greatly parodied in Jerrold's play, real matrimonial advertisements were not uncommon in London papers, and many respectable citizens would read them even when they would never dream of answering them.

¹¹⁹ Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement*, 2.

¹²⁰ Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement*, 4.

¹²¹ Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement*, 6.

¹²² Jerrold, *Wives by Advertisement*, 8.

It is frustrating that Jerrold's inconsequential farce can be definitively traced to a playhouse, a date, and an author while many other Red Barn plays have disappeared, and others prove much more difficult to pin down. As the Marylebone Theatre's ad makes clear, they were producing a version of the Red Barn in April of 1840. The Marylebone Theatre itself opened as "an unlicensed theatre for crude melodrama" under the name Royal Sussex in 1831 and soon changed its name to The Pavilion (not to be confused with the Royal Pavilion already discussed). Six years later it was torn down and rebuilt, opening as the Marylebone on 13 November 1837 in the same location at Church Street and Edgeware Road, London. It remained "a rather undistinguished house for melodrama and pantomime" through at least one more rebuild and two name changes.¹²³

Unfortunately, the 1840 Marylebone Theatre version of the Red Barn story is not, evidently, represented in print today. Of the three versions I have found, none of them include the Marylebone's advertised character of "Sally," or the extra role of "John" (not to be confused with "Johnny Rawbold," or "Waiter," who are both also still present).¹²⁴

Nor was the Marylebone alone in producing a unique Red Barn play. In 1828, James Curtis noted that, "It is ascertained that the proprietors of the Theatre Royal, Weymouth, announced that 'A New Melodrama, founded on facts, will be presented, entitled *THE RED BARN, or the Gipsy's Curse!!* embracing every particular of the late Mysterious Murder; at the same time everything revolting to human nature will be omitted, the names altered, and all personalities avoided; but yet offering to the rising

¹²³ Marker, "A Guide to London Theatres," lv-lvi. The Marylebone became The Royal Alfred in 1866, reverted back to Marylebone, and changed a final time to the plain name of West London Theatre. The theatre was damaged in World War II and was torn down in 1962. A more detailed history of the Marylebone Theatre can be found in *The Old Marylebone Theatre* by Malcolm Morely and *The Royal West London Theatre*, both by Malcolm Morely, published by St Marylebone Society (1960 and 1962, respectively).

¹²⁴ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 207.

generation a moral lesson.’ ”¹²⁵ This is another example of a contemporary retelling of the Red Barn story which cannot be found in print today; and yet, Curtis’s simple description provides quite a lot of information about the type of entertainment it offered. That Weymouth advertised its version as one “founded on facts,” while at the same time omitting, altering, and avoiding so much historical information shows how fluidly the “facts” were understood, and how important this “founded on facts” catch-phrase could be. Perhaps the most enduring murder melodrama, the legend of Sweeney Todd, was dramatized by George Dibdin-Pitt in 1847 as *The String of Pearls: The Fiend of Fleet Street*. When it opened at the Britannia Theatre, it, too, was advertised as being “Founded on Fact,” despite the fact that official records do not show any barber named Todd, or any barbershop in Fleet Street. In fact, the story seems to have originated from an 1825 French short story titled “A Terrible Story of the Rue de la Harpe,” popularized by Thomas Peckett Prest through penny dreadful installments in 1847.¹²⁶

Unlike the stories surrounding Sweeney Todd, the Red Barn plays are clearly based, however loosely, on a historical event. The script in *The Golden Age of Melodrama* is by an unnamed author; Kilgarriff thinks “probably he was the resident writer for the Star Theatre, Swansea,”¹²⁷ a playhouse in South Wales also known as the “New” Theatre.¹²⁸ The fact that, at any point in time, a script would be published in

¹²⁵ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 284-285.

¹²⁶ “PBS presents Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street in Concert: A String of Pearls.” <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/demonbarber/play/index.html> and “PBS presents Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street in Concert: True or False?” <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/demonbarber/penny/index.html>

¹²⁷ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 204.

¹²⁸ According to “The Melvilles,” <http://www.its-behind-you.com/melvilles.html>, a website dedicated to the history of British pantomime, the Star Theatre sat on Wind Street in Swansea, South

London that originated in South Wales indicates the remarkable appeal of the Red Barn story throughout Britain. Unable to find the date of the first performance of his Swansea text, Kilgarriff assures his readers that “the date of publication seems to have been as late as 1877, by which time it must have seemed very old-fashioned.”¹²⁹ There is a good reason why this mysterious Swansea script seems so old-fashioned; it is an almost verbatim copy of the Digges script. It is certainly dated from a period after 1828. By this time, the real William Corder and Maria Marten were both firmly removed from the world of the living, presumably offering an ambitious playwright greater freedom to adapt the material, had one chosen to do so. The anonymous author of *Maria Martin; or Murder in the Red Barn*, however, was not this adventurous. Kilgarriff believed that “only one stage version of Maria’s unhappy fate appears to have been published in the nineteenth century,”¹³⁰ but the physical existence of the Digges script contradicts Kilgarriff’s statement. This is not Kilgarriff’s only error. Kilgarriff also believed that the “first recorded stage version to appear in London was not until 1840.” He dismisses the Mile-End production as “well outside London.”¹³¹ Even if Kilgarriff’s city-limit argument was apt, he does not seem to know that, at least according to James Curtis, other metropolitan theatres were producing Red Barn plays in 1828. Had Kilgarriff glanced through the table of contents of James Curtis’s book, he could have flipped to the chapter, “Theatrical Notices of the Fate of Corder,”¹³² and saved his future readers much

Wales. The theatre served up a variety of popular entertainments, and in the early days of cinema it was converted to a movie hall. It was demolished in 1968.

¹²⁹ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 204-205.

¹³⁰ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 204.

¹³¹ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 206.

¹³² Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder...*, xix.

confusion. Still, Kilgarriff's collection of plays is valuable because it does make a Red Barn script accessible to many readers.

The Swansea script is so astonishingly similar to the Digges script that the anonymous author must have had access to a printed copy of the earlier play. There are also some minor but significant alterations. Perhaps it is worth starting with the misspelling of Maria's last name. The *Times* covered the case extensively, but offered up Maria's family name as "Martin." Shifting spellings of last names appears to have been common; in various newspaper and magazine articles, the policeman who arrested Corder is sometimes listed as "Lee" and other time "Lea," while the constable who escorted Corder back to Suffolk appears as "Ayres," "Ayers," and "Eyres" in various publications.¹³³ Remarkably, the Marten name appears as "Martin" only in the earliest *Times* accounts. Would a hack melodrama author in the 1870s have gone to the trouble of finding a newspaper archive from forty-plus years earlier to come up with this fact, as Kilgarriff proposes? It seems more likely that the writer was working within memory of the original events.

Structurally, this mid-nineteenth century version of the Red Barn play is longer than the Digges version because of the extra scenes and extra lines that make subtle but substantial changes to the play. In West Digges's script, one scene often contains a number of themes and involves entrances and exists of entire groups of characters. The Swansea playwright has carved the scenes into shorter sections along quite reasonable lines, such as thematic or character changes. There are therefore more sets, but the sets

¹³³ I chose "Lea" and "Ayres" as my default spellings for the historical people, because that is how they appear in the book by James Curtis.

chosen are more appropriate to the intended actions. Perhaps the Swansea playhouse simply had a different set of stock scenery than the Royal Pavilion.

The Swansea playwright chose to completely cut the comic “wife interview” scene. Digges likely included it because of the intense scrutiny into the practice of matrimonial advertisements. There are at least four criteria the Swansea author could have used in choosing to eliminate the scene. First, the “wife interview” scene does nothing to advance either the overall plot or underscore important characters, although given the nature of melodrama in general, the Swansea writer probably did not give this as much thought as a modern author would. Second, match-making advertising was apparently not as popular outside of London as it was in the rapidly modernizing and depersonalized metropolis, and therefore the central conceit of the scene may not have been as interesting to the Swansea audience. Third, the historical incident that spawned the original scene could have faded from collective memory, making the wife interview less meaningful. And last, the actors at the Swansea house may have had a different skill set than those at the Royal Pavilion. Although just about any house could be counted on to provide a capable heroine and villain, not all talent was equally distributed. Eliminating the wife interview scene eliminated the need to supply multiple comic specialists.

The Swansea playwright also makes less use of Anne and Tim. The first exchange between the rustic young lovers is left intact, but the second, where Tim mistakes Maria for a rival suitor, is shortened. The new playwright has excised the back-and-forth threats of suicide, which were so comic, if inappropriate, in Digges’s script. Instead, Tim announces he will “never seek to ’ee again,” prodding Anne simply to tease him “Yes

you will, Timothy; and what's more, you'll kiss me too... when you catch me." She then runs off, and a self-deprecating Tim Bobbin gives chase.¹³⁴ The biggest change for the comic characters has been a complete reworking of the figure of Johnny Rawbold, now known as "Johnny Raw." Timothy Bobbin and Johnny Raw have a contentious relationship; Johnny is not, as the cast list indicates, "his friend." Their association may have more to do with a traditional pairing of comic male types than this particular script allows. In their first encounter, an intoxicated Timothy falls asleep in a blackberry bramble and mistakenly takes Johnny for a girl when he awakes. The two engage in physical confrontation, with goofy singing, a wrestling match, and Timothy finally exiting on Johnny's shoulders, "crying, 'Gee up!'" as if on horseback.¹³⁵

Johnny's accent sets him apart from all the other characters. When he discovers Tim in the bushes, he muses, "Vot rum places these 'ere yokels live in. I'll pick 'im hup and hask 'im to show me the vay home."¹³⁶ Why does Johnny Raw speak with such an unusual accent? It can be summed up as a generally German or Eastern European sound. It would be farfetched to relate it solely to the phenomenon of England's Hanoverian Kings. The Hanoverians had spoken primarily German, utilizing a heavily-accented English only when necessary, but King George III had used English as his primary language and had taken the throne in 1760.¹³⁷ Today, the relatively recent explosion in genealogy has made it possible to find German/English links dating back centuries.

¹³⁴ Anonymous, *Maria Martin, or the Murder in the Red Barn*, in *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London: Wolfe Publishing Ltd, 1974): 223.

¹³⁵ Anonymous, *Maria Marin*, 229.

¹³⁶ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 229.

¹³⁷ "Historic Figures: George III," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/george_iii_king.shtml

Kory L. Meyerink, writing online for ProGenealogists.com, states, “The 1851 census reported that 9,566 residents of London had been born in Germany, and by 1891 the number was 26,920. These censuses report similar numbers resided throughout the rest of England.” Meyerink explains that it was relatively easy to travel between German and English port cities, which included Swansea. England established no immigrant controls until late in the nineteenth century.¹³⁸ During the 1800s, there was a constant stream of German immigrants arriving in England for a number of reasons, including, predictably, religious persecution and economic promise. Panikos Panayi, in *German Immigrants in Britain During the Nineteenth Century* explicitly includes Wales when discussing German immigrant census figures,¹³⁹ so it was possible that the Swansea playwright had contact with particular German-speaking communities.

At any rate, Johnny is presented as an outsider, dissatisfied with the quintessentially British rural world. The portrait of this linguistic immigrant is not a flattering one overall. Johnny, it seems, is so devoid of manly, British characteristics that he can be mistaken for a girl. He is a “mama’s-boy,” whining, “I’ll tell my ma... I want to go home to my ma,” when Timothy Bobbin first accosts him.¹⁴⁰ Johnny is also a cowardly bully: “You shall have a jolly volloping ven I finds my ma... Vy it vos only the other day that me and my ma, the butcher next door, two policemen, and some of my pals, pitched a beggar off our steps into the road, and although he had been ill for two

¹³⁸ Kory L. Meyerink, “Germans in England,” 16 March 2008, <http://www.progenealogists.com/germansengland.htm>

¹³⁹ David Feldman, “Review of *German Immigrants in Britain During the Nineteenth Century* by Panikos Panayi,” *The Economic History Review, New Series* 50, no. 1 (Feb. 1997): 180.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 229.

years and walked with a crutch, we managed him between us.”¹⁴¹ Johnny Raw says he has been forced to visit the country for his health and that he prefers his London home. Johnny’s ability to afford two homes, and regular travel between them, may indicate some class standing not afforded to the provincial central characters.

Despite his unpleasant attitude, Johnny is clearly a comic character, drawn with broad strokes and designed to work exclusively in relation to the other, recognizably British comic male. Timothy is able to engage Johnny in a kind of physical slapstick that his relationship with Anne does not allow. The script demands that both Johnny Raw and Tim Bobbin be played by actors with exceptional physical abilities; in both of Johnny’s scenes, he is involved in gymnastic tumbling, piggy-back riding, falls, and fist-fighting with Timothy. Johnny Raw is still a superfluous, irrelevant character as far as the Maria/William plot is concerned, but he is perhaps uniquely revealing in regards to the playwright’s attitude towards merchant-class immigrant populations and the commercial theatre’s use of physical humor in a homosocial setting.

The family, however, remains at the heart of melodrama, and the commercial theatre in Wales chose to heighten its importance in several small ways. The Swansea playwright has deliberately added family-oriented lines to Maria’s dialogue, perhaps in an attempt to give Maria some substantial redeeming qualities to make up for her well-known, historical flaws. The Swansea playwright makes sure to close the first scene with statements that define Maria not in relation William, for whom she has been pining, but as a devoted member of her nuclear family. At the end of the first scene, Maria and her mother decide to tell her father about her engagement. In the Digges version, Dame

¹⁴¹ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 233.

Marten has the final line of this section: “Come my child and let us meet him.”¹⁴² But in the anonymous later play, the author has given additional closing lines to Maria: “Yes, dear mother, and greet him with smiling faces, and thus make glad a father’s heart with news of his daughter’s happiness. May heaven, in its mercy, look down on our humble roof, and shower blessings on the whitening heads of my aged parents.”¹⁴³ At the murder, Maria still cries “mercy” four times and “spare me” five times, but her new pleas serve to emphasize her devotion to her family, even in the face of death: “For my aged parents’ sake,” and “For my child’s sake,” are her most elaborate sentiments.¹⁴⁴ Even young George is slightly rewritten to make the most of his familial love. In this new version, upon seeking out William at Maria’s behest, young George announces, “I love my sister and cannot bear to see her suffer.”¹⁴⁵

William, too, has been touched up, but the changes are slighter. The additions to William’s lines serve to make him more explicitly evil, and leave less to the audience’s imagination. Altick, although generally steering clear of “the perilous water of socio-historical psychoanalysis,” does admit that the stunningly delineated characters and highly charged, emotionally affecting performances thrilled an audience that otherwise led “intellectually empty and emotionally stunted lives, so tightly confined by economic and social circumstances,” offering the lower and middle classes both a vicarious thrill and the “sheer occupation of minds otherwise rendered blank or dull by the absence of

¹⁴² Digges, *The Red Barn*, 7.

¹⁴³ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 217.

¹⁴⁴ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225-226.

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 219.

anything more pleasing or intellectually elevated.”¹⁴⁶ By the time of the second extant Red Barn adaptation, there are no longer any half-finished sentences, and the text provides no punctuation allowing actors to trail off into private thought.

The murder scene itself demonstrates some compelling re-writing. In Digges’s version, the audience is swept from William’s own self-motivating speech to the murder without delay. Maria is allowed only twelve lines, all of which are variations on “What do you mean?” “What mean you, William,” and “Spare me, spare me.”¹⁴⁷ In the Swansea version, the author has expanded the exchange between victim and villain. Maria is allowed a monologue of her own, giving her time to describe her own impressions and feelings: “A chill is on my heart, and horrible imaginings crowd upon my brain, foreboding terror to my soul. Oh William, William, to thee I trust for future happiness!”¹⁴⁸ The additions show an expanded interest in the female victim’s perceptions, but the effect is primarily to emphasize her blindness and heighten the atmospheric tension leading up to the violent act that all the audience knows is to come. Knowing the upcoming plot or action does not necessarily decrease the audience’s enjoyment. Audiences have flocked to *Romeo and Juliet* for centuries, knowing full well that the couple will not make it out alive. The audience is not looking to discover *what* happens, but rather *how* it happens. The audience for Victorian melodrama continued to attend familiar stories because they knew the characters would engage their interest and stir their emotions.

¹⁴⁶ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 10.

¹⁴⁷ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 224.

The reworking of Maria's death scene, however, is considerably more sensational and motivations are more explicit in the Swansea script. Maria's relationship with Mr. Peter Mathews is explained: "All thy love was lavished on the hated Mathews," William accuses, "What is Mathew's brat to me?"¹⁴⁹ William still tells Maria that her threat regarding a potential prison term, has "roused a scorpion." But his motivation is now born from a preoccupation with power. "Hast thou not threatened me? And am I not in thy power? No – (pause) – thou art in *mine*, and by heaven I will keep thee so; ay, and for ever."¹⁵⁰ This passage highlights an element of the real case at which Digges merely hinted. The historical Marten had, by her own stepmother's account, some sort of knowledge that could apparently be used to blackmail Corder into doing as she wished,¹⁵¹ an inversion of power that is intolerable to the fictional William. Typically, the Swansea script assumes Maria's secret knowledge to be about the death of her child. William does offer her a way out: "Instantly swear to keep the murder of our child a secret, and renounce all pretensions of becoming my wife, or by Heaven you'll never quit this spot alive," he announces.¹⁵² The audience, of course, would not expect Maria to accept this proposal. Maria explains that she longs to "once more walk erect, and look my fellow-creatures in the face, without the blush of shame mantling my cheeks,"¹⁵³ further emphasizing her previous moral failings and her desire for redemption through marriage.

¹⁴⁹ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225.

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225.

¹⁵¹ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 23. Mrs. Anne Marten testified in court, "I heard my daughter say to him, 'If I go to jail, you shall go too.' She often said this; about once a week before she went away with him."

¹⁵² Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225.

¹⁵³ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225.

Interestingly to a modern reader, the nineteenth-century playwright assumes the present world is acceptable, never questioning the social and moral pressures that would drive a “lapsed” woman to pursue a fatal match, forging ahead even when confronted with her own demise.

The death scene itself has been described with much more attention to detail. In West Digges’s version, the murder is swift and clean, brought about by a pistol, which was clearly the actual method. The stage description in Digges’ script is terse: “Fires, Maria falls.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps Digges trusted that his actors would be accomplished enough to know that they should move beyond these three words and craft a truly memorable death scene. But the later adaptation makes much of the death scene, drawing it out as long as possible. “Music. She tries to escape. He seizes her – throws her round. She falls on her knees... She shrieks as he attempts to stab her... He again attempts to stab her. She clings round his neck. He dashes her to the earth, and stabs her. She shrieks and falls. He stands motionless till the curtain falls.”¹⁵⁵ This is a clear direction for the theatre to stage a *tableaux vivant*, a convention of the period. “A play might be arrested at the point where a familiar and recognizable picture was realized,” explains Robert Alan Donovan.¹⁵⁶ Pamphlets, broadsides, and Curtis’s book alike reproduced artists’ recreations of the murder scene. The image of Corder standing over Marten’s attractively disarrayed body was a popular one, and the playwright was smart enough to capitalize on it.

¹⁵⁴ Digges, *The Red Barn*,

¹⁵⁵ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 225-226.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Alan Donovan, “Review of *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 93.

The final scenes of the Swansea play differ somewhat from the Digges version. In both Digges's play and the Swansea version, Maria's father calls for both divine and earthly justice. "Oh Heaven, deliver the murderer into the hands of justice," he calls, "Let not those glorious laws – the brightest pearls which gem our monarch's throne and deare [sic] to every Briton's heart – be thus outraged and basely violated!"¹⁵⁷ In the Digges version, Farmer Marten leaves the stage for the last time crying, "Thy father's coming, he will revenge thee my child."¹⁵⁸ Although the father does not revenge his daughter's death in any of the plays, the Swansea playwright explicitly removes the possibility by adding an extra line for Mrs. Martin. As Martin rushes out, Mrs. Martin hurries after him, saying, "Come Anne, let us follow him, lest in his frenzy he may commit some rash act that will add to our sorrows."¹⁵⁹ Justice, or the application thereof, is not in the hands of the virtuous father, a figure traditionally charged with the safekeeping of the family. This duty has been handed over to the officer of the law. The legal system in England had changed from the time of William Corder's trial and execution. In 1829, London's Metropolitan Police Force was formally established. Visible and recognizable, the new police attempted to prevent crime as much as to apprehend criminals, and relied on the London citizenry to assist. The *Police Gazette* of the period bore the subtitle, *Hue and Cry*, referencing any phrase a watchman might shout out (such as "Stop, thief!") when chasing a suspect; bystanders were expected to assist the newly enfranchised

¹⁵⁷ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 230.

¹⁵⁸ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 24.

¹⁵⁹ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 230-231.

policemen.¹⁶⁰ William is apprehended by “an Officer,” and the playwrights present him in the best light. The parents’ exit is immediately followed by the arrival of Mr. Lee at William Corder’s London home. But the Swansea writer adds a few lines to the dry exchange. William protests the reasoning behind his arrest, forcing Lee to explicate a clear line of deductive calculations: “*Because she was last known to be in your company, and you being the only person who had a motive in her death!*”¹⁶¹ In the Digges’s play, Lee confiscates a small pen-knife from William at the moment of arrest. Digges probably included the discovery of the pen-knife simply to bring his play into line with the pamphlet reports that Corder might have stabbed Marten with a small knife. The Swansea author cuts this bit of trivia. Within a few decades of the actual murder, the Welsh author added lines that revised the status of justice, and removed superfluous references that would have served, in Digges’ time, to authenticate the narrative.

Perhaps the most significant change to the end of the play was the transposition of the trial and execution from Suffolk to London itself. When Digges’ Red Barn play appeared in London, “the majority of workers in London and the industrial towns before 1850 were emigrants from the country.” The shattering crime, committed in the countryside, emphasized the “lost rural heritage, lost simplicity, a lost innocence.”¹⁶² Again, generalizations can be dangerous, but I think it fair to say that “Polstead” or “Bury St Edmunds” likely would have meant next to nothing, personally or symbolically, to the people in Wales. The ports and mines surrounding Wales were different from the farming

¹⁶⁰ Ginny Crothswaite, “‘They Belong to Ourselves!’ Criminal Proximity in Nineteenth Century British Narrative and Culture,” (Ann Arbor: Proquest Information and Learning Co, 2004): 56-57. (Crothswaite’s PhD dissertation at Rice University.)

¹⁶¹ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 232.

¹⁶² Booth, “The Social and Literary Context,” 33-34.

towns around Suffolk, and the Welsh people had their own distinct cultural identity. London, meanwhile, had a certain cachet. “The metropolis fascinated Victorian playwrights and audiences,” writes Michael Booth. “A deliberate artistic and thematic use of London as an image of existence, a moral symbol, a strikingly visual and richly human presentation of the realities of its daily living, originated in the theatre with the Victorian stage.”¹⁶³ The Welsh audience had more reason to explore, vicariously, the crowded urban core than some misty pastoral town. In the Swansea script, London is framed by the experiences of the rustic Tim, who can hardly navigate the urban environment. Timothy Bobbin believed London to be a place full of “all the foine sights,” but his personal experience is less rosy. “What a queer place this Lunnon is; everybody seems to be knocking agin everybody else, and nobody don’t take any notice on it. Somebody knocked up agin I just now, and when I turned round to punch his yead, dang me, if somebody else didn’t knock my hat over my eyes.” Disoriented and embarrassed, jostled around by the sheer number of people on the streets, Tim finally admits, “I come to see t’ hanging and I canna find out t’ place.” When Tim and Johnny Raw become reacquainted, the two men take off their jackets to fight, and their items are stolen by members of the cheering crowd just before the police arrive to break up the fight, and haul away the perpetrators.¹⁶⁴ The scene again requires physical feats from both Tim and Johnny, and the metropolitan police do, indeed, restore order to the scene. But Timothy’s mention of “the hanging” is all that lets the audience know of the verdict handed down in William’s trial. The Swansea author eliminates the gossiping peasant scene used by

¹⁶³ Booth, “A Defence of Nineteenth Century English Drama,” 10-11.

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous, *Maria Martin*, 233-234.

Digges to cover the trial and verdict.¹⁶⁵ The trial itself was, in 1828, a tremendous event, even for nineteenth-century people who considered a hanging a reasonable substitute for entertainment. By the time the Digges script reached Swansea, the trial was irrelevant. The playwright instead hurries the audience into Corder's "condemned cell," and the scene where Maria's ghost appears.

In Swansea, the appearance of Maria's ghost is accompanied by "blue fire." Whether that was a lighting trick effected by gas, a real flash flame made more intense by additives, or a fabric or wooden creation handcrafted by the theatre's scenic shop is hard to determine. Maria's ghost is a fixture in all three surviving Red Barn plays, and marks the true dramatic climax. The ghost demands that William look on the "unearthly" form of the "sinless victim," an interesting choice of words to describe a nineteenth-century woman who has had a baby out of wedlock. Montagu Slater proposed that "curious changes in social habits" were responsible for a Victorian reworking of the seduction narrative. "It was now for the first time possible for a heroine to be innocent as to soul and experienced as to body."¹⁶⁶ The significance of the ghost is not lost on either William or the audience. The presence of a ghost indicates that something has gone wrong in the progression from life to the state after life. Colin Davis, in *Haunted Subjects*, charts this belief from Pliny the Younger through Lacan to the present day: "The answer offered by Lacan [to the question of why the dead return] is the same as that found in popular culture: because they were not properly buried, i.e., because something went wrong.... The dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt." The dead linger when they

¹⁶⁵ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 27.

¹⁶⁶ Slater, "Introduction," ix.

have unfinished business with the living.¹⁶⁷ Maria's murder is certainly cause enough to keep her spirit close to earth while the murderer remains alive and unrepentant.

But this kind of haunting has another purpose in the nineteenth-century literature and drama, and it has more to do with William and the conventions of confession than with Maria. There were expectations placed on both the confessor and the pamphlet printer. Historically, Corder plead not guilty in court and initially refused to confess despite pressure from his attorney, his wife, the jailhouse chaplain, and even the jailer, John Orridge, who sent him a long letter on the night before his execution, quoting various scriptural passages and urging him to admit to his crime. There was a sense of anxiety among pamphlet printers, too, that perhaps Corder would not confess at all. "Could we know that the prisoner would make a full and accurate confession, there would be little reason for publishing a partly dubious narrative; but, as it is, very probably he will make no confession at all," wrote one pamphlet author.¹⁶⁸ The "conventions of the confession pamphlet," as Patricia Cline Cohen explains, required the confessor to "describe [his life] as one of continual drinking, stealing, and gaming." The "Puritan murder confession" was most satisfying when the killer "dreamed of angels, singing birds, and representations of heaven," then decided that he could not lie before God any longer.¹⁶⁹ The night before his execution, Corder finally did pen a confession. It was

¹⁶⁷ Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return fo the Dead* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 2. Quoting Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001): 23.

¹⁶⁸ *The Trial of William Corder at Bury St. Edmund's Before the Lord Chief Baron Alexander, on the 7th and 8th of August 1828, for the Murder of Maria Marten; Together with Some Account of Their Lives, Containing a Narration of the Numerous Atrocities Committed by Corder, and Other Interesting Particulars Hitherto Unpublished* (Bury St. Edmund's: T. D. Dutton, 1828): 4.

¹⁶⁹ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999): 438. Cohen discusses an American case, but the confession convention seems borne out in England as well.

straightforward, unremarkable, and ultimately unsatisfying. The public, and the pamphleteers, simply did not want to believe Corder's simple account of accidental manslaughter. The dramatists who cobbled together the Red Barn plays were able to introduce an important, fictional confession scene into the story, satisfying a cultural expectation that the actual confession did not fulfill.

In *Maria Martin*, as in the other Red Barn plays, William's confession is brought on by his own guilt and the ghost's urging. A theatre-goer does not even need to believe in ghosts personally for a dramatic haunting to be effective. A well-executed Shakespearean Ghost of Banquo or Old Hamlet can thrill audiences today. Throughout the nineteenth century, believers and skeptics alike explored the possible existence of ghosts, telepathy, the supernatural and the paranormal. The ghost on stage might have tapped into this, or it might have been perfectly effective as sheer spectacle. The nineteenth-century actor could wear elaborate paint, rise through trap doors, glide on hidden wheeled platforms, be lowered from the increasingly popular fly system, or appear through mirrored projections. In the melodrama playhouse, the physical manifestation of Maria's ghost was likely as compelling as its narrative existence. Through the combination of spectacle, moving characters, and a story line that simply would not disappear, the Red Barn plays themselves, like Maria's ghost, lingered not because they were factually accurate but because they told a compelling story.

Chapter 4: The Red Barn Story on Tour

In 1828, when the Royal Pavilion opened its doors for forty nights of *The Red Barn*, the anticipated audience would have known the basic facts. The theatre-goers who watched later plays may have had months or even years of distance from the original event, but the sequence of events and cast of characters never disappeared far from the public consciousness. The Red Barn story continued to reappear in print and on stage throughout Britain. The appearance of the Red Barn story in the *New Newgate Calendar* in 1841 perpetuated the presence of the case in the minds of early nineteenth-century Londoners, and shows that the *New Newgate Calendar* printers believed it to be of marketable interest.¹⁷⁰ Even Henry Irving appeared in a Red Barn play at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Liverpool, in 1865, a year prior to his London debut.¹⁷¹

There is an obvious and seemingly inevitable shift that occurs when material becomes divorced from its historical source, by time or distance, and is reinterpreted and adapted. When the adapter is freed from the constraints of historical reporting, the adapter is likely to create an increasingly effective artistic, if fictional, product.¹⁷² So it is not surprising that the last script to be discussed here, attributed to John Latimer, is the most sophisticated in terms of plot construction, character development, and scenic

¹⁷⁰ Camden Pelham (pen name), "William Corder, Executed for the Murder of Maria Marten," *The Chronicles of Crime; or the New Newgate Calendar, Being a Series of Memoirs and Anecdotes of Notorious Characters who have Outraged the Laws of Great Britain from the Earliest Period to the Present Time.* Vol. 2. (London: Bradbury and Evans [Whitefriars], 1841): 146-157. According to the title page, this collection was printed for Thomas Tegg of Cheapside and for James Tegg in Sydney and S. A. Tegg in Hobart Town (Australia), and R. Griffin & Co. in Glasgow. The *Newgate Calendar* held an international appeal.

¹⁷¹ Kilgarriff, *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 206.

¹⁷² My colleague, Rob Thompson, at the University of Maryland, refers to this as "the sophistication of adaptation."

demands. This is not to claim that Latimer's *Maria Marten, or Murder in the Red Barn* is a great work of literature. It is still a melodrama, full of simplistic people and situations, spectacles, stolen dialogue, and song and dance numbers. But where other playwrights had quoted newspapers and sketched out situations, this *Maria Marten* offers a coherent and original (although still typical) plot with a discernable timeline and involves characters whose soul-searching musings show an increased attention to both character and motivation.

John Latimer, according to twentieth-century editor Montagu Slater, was the writer-in-residence at the Queen's Theatre, Battersea. Latimer's son ran a portable theatre and it was his stepson who made the handwritten manuscript available for publication.¹⁷³ Battersea, located on the south bank of the Thames, went through booming changes in the mid-nineteenth century, as did most London suburbs. Battersea Park opened to the public, new school buildings were raised, and a teacher's college was established.¹⁷⁴ At least four railroad companies and six rail lines eventually criss-crossed the district; by 1863, new train depots ensured that the rail traffic would soon surpass shipping traffic from Thames.¹⁷⁵ Warehouses sprang up, along with slum dwellings for the working poor, many of whom were Irish immigrants. Farther south, farmland was converted into

¹⁷³ Montagu Slater, "Introduction," viii.

¹⁷⁴ Roderick Floud and Sean Glynn, *London Higher: The Establishment of Higher Education in London*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group (1998): 227-228.

¹⁷⁵ "A Short Introduction to the History of the Borough of Wandsworth," <http://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/Home/LeisureandTourism/Aboutborough/abthistory.htm#battersea> All Battersea websites note that the area suffered heavy bombing during World War II and underwent extensive rebuilding following the war. Most of the nineteenth century buildings were destroyed, but at least a few school buildings and the 1865 London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway train station survived. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/ConBar.5589>

pleasant terraced homes for upper merchant classes. In this environment, John Latimer penned his manuscript, and then sent it on tour with the family business.

Although it was clearly acted on stage, John Latimer's script was not, apparently, published until 1921 when Montagu Slater acquired and preserved it. The script was popular from then on; it had enough of a presence that when Kilgarriff was embarking on his own editorial project, he explained, "Maria's fate is still being re-enacted regularly to this day in Montague Slater's very poor 1928 version,"¹⁷⁶ although he is wrong about the publication date and the spelling of Slater's first name, as well as in the more subjective area judging of its artistic merit. It is true that Slater worked from a "tattered old manuscript;"¹⁷⁷ Slater himself admitted that it was "written in a old exercise book in scrawling illiterate handwriting. Spelling and punctuation had a marked individuality." The script contained original staging notes, some "indicated by hieroglyphics," which Slater went to the trouble of decoding and translating for his publication.¹⁷⁸ As Paul D. Herring noted, "There are not only radical variations between the acting editions of a single play but also (especially before 1860) important differences between the text as acted on the stage and as published by the author." Removed from their performance context and relegated to dry text, the scripts may appear "indefensibly bad" on the page even when they played beautifully before adoring audiences.¹⁷⁹ The raw nature of the Latimer script, purposed for performance rather than for print, can now be seen as a

¹⁷⁶ Kilgarriff, "Introduction," *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 207-208.

¹⁷⁷ Kilgarriff, "Introduction," *The Golden Age of Melodrama*, 208.

¹⁷⁸ Slater, "Introduction," viii.

¹⁷⁹ Paul D. Herring, "Nineteenth Century Drama," *Modern Philology* 68, no. 1 (Aug. 1970): 83.

positive characteristic, placing the reader a degree closer to the performance than a typically cleaned-up printed script allows.

So what kind of theatre event did John Latimer's script provide? Immediately, Latimer develops a city/country division that is thematically essential to his story, despite Pedley's conclusions that in practice Red Barn melodramas, because of their universal appeal, largely erased this boundary.¹⁸⁰ Latimer's play begins at a village festival, with virginal Maria leading the younger people in a dance ("a Sir Roger de Coverly").¹⁸¹ The villain's music takes over as sophisticated William Corder, newly arrived in town, enters and asks Maria to dance. When Maria virtuously refuses his advances, her father apologizes, "She is only a country lass and doesn't know the manners of your fine London ladies." Even Tim Bobbin says he distrusts "that London Chap."¹⁸²

Although temporarily thwarted, William, riding crop and top hat in hand, muses before the audience, "Pretty and coy, yet she shall be mine for I feel I love and have set my heart on possessing her..."¹⁸³ His small monologue provides an important insight into how William constructs his desires for Maria. From beginning to end, his feelings of love are never separated from issues of possession and money and status, as he actively

¹⁸⁰ This argument is the central point in Pedley's article "The Theatricality of Provincial Life."

¹⁸¹ James Prescott, "Sir Roger de Coverley: Reconstruction." Accessed 27 March 2008. <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/prescotj/data/dance/rogercoverley.html>. A Sir Roger de Coverly (or Coverley) is the mature English form of what began as a Pre-Christian Celtic folk dance, and is most closely related to the Virginia Reel danced in America. There were specific choreographed moves that went with a Sir Roger de Coverly, laid out in 1814 in Thomas Wilson's book *The Complete System of English Country Dancing*. Ideally danced by six energetic couples, it can be adapted to suit four couples, and uses a skipping or jig step to execute patterns that would be easily recognized by square-dancers or contra-dancers today. The Sir Roger de Coverley appears in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as the climax of Fezziwig's Christmas celebration.

¹⁸² John Latimer, *Maria Marten, or the Murder in the Red Barn: A Victorian Melodrama*, ed. Montagu Slater. (London: Heinemann Education Books, 1971), 3-4.

¹⁸³ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 4-5.

maintains a position of economic and social power over his victim, befitting the typical melodramatic villain. As Tim carries the Marten's rent payment to the Corder house, he says, "Squire had sent for it and [Marten]'s three weeks behind."¹⁸⁴ Both fictionally and historically, William Corder was the son of the local squire. Latimer makes more of this juxtaposition of power and weakness than the other dramatists.

William uses his money for his own ends. His first act is to bribe an old gypsy into telling Maria's fortune in such a way that she will be primed to accept his advances. The gypsies might be, as Montagu Slater suggests, merely "a convention in Victorian melodramas. It was felt their presence brought a touch of poetry."¹⁸⁵ A closer look at the Red Barn story reminds the reader that fortune tellers were part of the original narrative, and gypsies passed through the Suffolk countryside regularly.¹⁸⁶ Corder was surprisingly uncommunicative throughout his trial, even refusing to speak of the case to his esteemed brother-in-law. The prisoner was silent while in Colchester for the coroner's inquest, but afterward, on his way to the Bury Jail, he felt compelled to "force conversation" with his escort, the noble and familiar officer Lea. Curtis wrote about their conversation, "[Corder] believed there was some reliance to be placed in the prognostics of fortune-tellers, for about twelve years since his fate had been foretold by an old woman... He added, all her prophecies regarding me have come to pass."¹⁸⁷ The morally upright author

¹⁸⁴ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 24.

¹⁸⁵ Slater, "Introduction," viii.

¹⁸⁶ There are still populations of Gypsies in and around Suffolk. A press release issued 24 October 2007 from Marianne Hulland of the St Edmundsbury Borough Council announced, "There is a shortage of sites for Gypsies and Travellers in the eastern region. Within St Edmundsbury the borough council needs to find space for 15 pitches... Gypsies and Travellers have the same rights to housing as those who live in the settled community... Having well-managed, authorised sites will also help to improve community relations." (<http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/sebc/new/PR24100702.cfm>)

offered his own editorial footnote: “It is a very unusual thing for those Sibyls to prognosticate that evil shall befall those who are foolish enough to believe that the ignorant vagabonds whom they apply to can unfold the ‘Book of Fate.’” Fortune-telling was a suspect art, practiced primarily by transients considered neither wise nor virtuous. Curtis concluded, “It is devoutly to be hoped that this relation given by Corder will not become an inducement to others to pry into futurity.”¹⁸⁸

Believable or not, “Ishmael the Gypsy” is the linchpin of the Latimer story. He is also an avenging father more active than Farmer Marten was in any adaptation. “Our Zella was the sunshine of our hearts,” Ishmael tells the audience. “It was here the betrayer saw and won her from us and cast her off to die, heartbroken and neglected.” Ishmael sees his daughter’s seducer approaching; it is none other than William Corder.¹⁸⁹ William does not realize their connection, and when he pays Ishmael to tell Maria’s fortune, the gypsy agrees to assist for his own selfish reasons: “I’ll aid this William and in doing so, further my own revenge. I’ll lead him on step by step till he mounts the scaffold.”¹⁹⁰

Ishmael knows that his fortune-telling stint will make Maria susceptible to William’s charms, but Ishmael is consumed by thoughts of vengeance and Maria is expendable. Melodramas can be problem plays. Despite the general sense that the villain is often irredeemably, inexplicably bad, in practice they may reveal particular, rationalized motivations. For example, in *Luke the Labourer*, John Buckstone’s popular

¹⁸⁷ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 30.

¹⁸⁸ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 30.

¹⁸⁹ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 6-7.

¹⁹⁰ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 8.

and decidedly English domestic melodrama, the villainous figure is driven to alcoholism and crime after watching his dear wife die in his arms from preventable starvation. John Walker's *The Factory Lad* was another important play even if it was not necessarily a popular success; Walker lets the heroes perish, and permits the villain to lay his exploitive labor practices squarely on the backs of middle-class consumers who demand ever-lower prices on manufactured goods. In John Frick's estimation, "English domestic melodrama, in response to 'the disease of modernism,' became increasingly radicalized by its selection of subject matter – the everyday hardships suffered by workers and their families... and by rhetoric designed to foreground and accentuate the grim realities, class hatreds, and daily crises routinely encountered by the masses."¹⁹¹ These villains are not exactly sympathetic figures, but they are allowed to have a little motivation for behaving the way they do. Ishmael, too, offers reasons why he can conscionably take part in Maria's destruction: "She is not one of our people, and what mercy did the white race ever show us? Have they not driven us from village to village, chained and imprisoned us?"¹⁹² Indeed, during the nineteenth century, Gypsies were considered a separate race of people. As Katie Trumpener explains in her article "The Time of the Gypsies," the very term "gypsy," with all its perjorative connotations, "is not a self-designation but a Western coinage based on false surmises about the group's race and place of origin." Gypsy appearances in nineteenth-century fiction offered "fantasies in which individual or historical difference of experience within 'the Gypsy camp' are left deliberately

¹⁹¹ John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth Century America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003): 88.

¹⁹² Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 8.

undifferentiated and unexplored.”¹⁹³ Ishmael is a type, after all, and ultimately the audience is not asked to move beyond their preconceived ideas about either gypsy people or mysticism they represent.

The gypsies grow both more sympathetic and more problematic as the play progresses. Mark and Amos, gypsy leaders, rally the gypsy camp midway through the play. “This William Corder has set the police on us, hunted us like wild beasts from the land his good father allowed us to pitch our tents on, and for resistance to the Law many of our tribe lie in the Jail, so Corder’s life shall answer for it.” Ishmael stays their hands only by claiming that vengeance on William Corder belongs to him alone.¹⁹⁴ Of course, William is legally within his rights to chase “gypsy vagrants”¹⁹⁵ from his property, but it is impossible not to sympathize at least somewhat with the gypsy people who have been treated as sub-human. Only William, the thorough villain, refers to gypsies in unequivocally negative terms. When Ishmael catches the other young people on the road to the fair, and offers to tell their fortunes, Anne and Tim are positively excited. Maria replies, “I have no belief in your stories and if I had I am too poor to tempt your skill.”¹⁹⁶ But Ishmael will tell Maria’s fortune. He passes into a kind of trance, then speaks in verse. Although he is supposed to tell Maria to meet William at the country dance, he instead offers tidings of happiness and woe, closing with “Listen and be warned ere it be too late, / At the old Red Barn shall you meet your fate.”¹⁹⁷ Then, Ishmael vanishes.

¹⁹³ Katie Trumpener, “The Time of the Gypsies: A ‘People without History’ in the Narratives of the West,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4, Identities. (Summer, 1992): 847.

¹⁹⁴ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 26-27.

¹⁹⁵ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 15.

¹⁹⁶ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 9. Maria is never free from economic concerns.

The audience had already seen a rousing and intricate dance to amuse them, which is itself a kind of spectacle. But to see a man vanish was not uncommon. The stage in the nineteenth century had developed into a complex, well-oiled machine. The nineteenth century playhouse became the domain of the “scene painter... stage machinist, carpenter, and lighting man at a time when technical developments in stage machinery, trapdoors, sets, the controlled use of gas, limelight, and stage fire, all contributed to a visual excitement, a mechanical ingenuity, and a sense of theatrical effect not known on the English stage before or since.”¹⁹⁸ It is essential to bear this in mind. The expectations for English theatre buildings had undergone great changes since the Restoration. There were still groove systems for sliding flats on and off stage, but the new theatres featured great basements and pits with slots for raising or lowering scenery or people through removable strips of stage floor. Trap doors and accompanying elevator mechanisms were popular. Individual actors became part of the spectacle when they were raised or lowered on bridges or through concealed traps.¹⁹⁹ The new technology would have enabled a theatre doing Latimer’s play to have a mysteriously disappearing and reappearing gypsy, and to effect scenery changes required to present nineteen separate scenes.

Scenes with William, the villain, all have a dark tone, but this is again balanced by appearances from our favorite comic couple, Tim and Anne. As before, Anne participates in tricks and dress-up jokes at Tim’s expense. Before the first scene ends, she has rallied the villagers into putting on sheets and moaning like ghosts to frighten the

¹⁹⁷ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 9.

¹⁹⁸ Booth, “A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama,” 7.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Leacroft, “The Stage as a Machine,” *The Development of the English Playhouse* (London: Methuen, 1988), 197-219.

blustery, cowardly Tim. Thus, ghosts open and close this play. The historic Mrs. Anne Marten may have seen Marten's ghost in 1828, but sixty years later doctors, writers, and scientists were still busy undertaking investigations into questions of ghosts and communication from beyond the grave. By the 1880s, the Society for Psychical Research had been founded. The group was comprised of a surprising collection of spiritualists and skeptics. Its ranks eventually included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Oliver Lodge, and Lewis Carroll. These men, in one way or another, attempted to bridge the emerging "science vs. religion" gap with experiments and insights.²⁰⁰ Although there were many scientists and doctors who decried spiritualist movements and its adherents as frauds, tricksters, maniacs, and hysterical women, hauntings and séances were an unavoidable part of the Victorian cultural landscape.²⁰¹ Even Ishmael's fortune telling sequence begs some kind of interrogation in this light. Could it be that Latimer, by presenting a genuine gypsy trance, was giving the subject his tacit approval? Conversely, could it be that by making the fortune-telling part of a nefarious scheme, Latimer was offering a warning about the corrupt performance?

Also part of the Victorian world, and the theatre world in particular, were the portable theatres. A rustic version of the portable theatre made an appearance in James Curtis's reports from the Polstead Cherry Fair festivities. John Latimer was in a unique position to introduce provincial performance into his play; the Latimer family ran a portable theatre that regularly made a circuit through England and Wales. On 14 November 1852, *The Era* reported that Latimer's traveling theatre sustained a profitable

²⁰⁰ John D. Root, "Science, Religion, and Psychical Research: The Monistic Thought of Sir Oliver Lodge," *The Harvard Theological Review* 71, no. 3/4 (July-Oct 1978): 245-246.

²⁰¹ Judith R. Walkowitz, "Science and the Séance: Transgressions of Gender and Genre in Late Victorian London," *Representations* 22. (Spring 1988): 4-7.

season at Wrexham. The John Latimer who ran the portable theatre in 1858 wrote in his will, "I give and bequeath all my Waggon, Theatrical Dresses, Scenery and Stages, Living Van, Pit, Gallery, Coverings, Frontings, Paintings, and the whole of the Articles and Things forming my large building, now known as 'Latimer's Mammoth Theatre,' to my dear wife."²⁰² This was clearly not a group carrying little packs on their backs and eking out a meager existence; the Latimers ran a large and well-outfitted venture, eventually basing their touring company in West Bromwich, near Birmingham. On 11 April 1865, the Latimer company advertised one of their new dramas in a playbill, calling it *The Maniac of Chirk Castle*.²⁰³ *The Maniac of Chirk Castle* surely must have been a melodrama in the gothic, romantic vein.²⁰⁴

Latimer clearly understood the touring circuit, but he refrained from including a melodrama within his melodrama. Instead, *Maria Marten* features two showmen at the country fair named Flat-Catcher and Tober-Sloper. Tober-Sloper's "game" this time is "going in for the Fat Woman," which requires his assistant, Jacko, to dress up in an elaborate stuffed costume. Flat-Catcher, meanwhile, is selling a "living skeleton" show, which is revealed to be a half-starved monkey. Flat-Catcher and Tober-Sloper both get into more than one fight over who has the better show, and both are allowed to hawk and cry and pitch their sales to the fair-goers, offering up great carnival side-show

²⁰² Cecil Price, "Portable Theatres in Wales, 1843-1914," *The National Library of Wales Journal* 9, no. 1 (1955). Excerpts available through GENUKI: "permission of the National Library of Wales." <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/Theatres.html> John Latimer seems to be a reasonably popular name. It appears that the Latimers passed theatrical ventures back and forth, working in both fixed and portable theatres. This makes it hard sometimes to figure out which generation is the subject of discussion.

²⁰³ Cecil Price, "Portable Theatres in Wales, 1843-1914."

²⁰⁴ Chirk Castle, in Wales, was built in the late thirteenth century. It is reportedly haunted and continuously inhabited to the present day. "Chirk and the Ceiriog Valley in Wrexham North Wales," <http://www.chirk.com/castle.html> See also "The National Trust" <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-chirkcastle/>

monologues. In the end, the showmen are exposed, and “the curtain falls on a riotous scene,” as the villagers and showmen have a brawl.²⁰⁵ This scene offers a unique and very funny insider’s view into the carnival world of the rural entertainment business.

At the end of Act One, Maria becomes separated from her family at the fair, and allows a courteous William Corder to serve as her escort. He fills her ears with promises of the “sights of London, the balls, concerts, theatres, and joys that make life worth living.”²⁰⁶ Again, London is exhibited as a place of interest, of culture, and, through William, of danger. William eventually succeeds in ingratiating himself with Maria and later seducing her. By the time the curtain rises for Act Two, the audience learns from Ishmael that Maria has “fallen Corder’s victim, a child the off-spring of her shame is born, and William already wearies of his toy.”²⁰⁷ Into the gypsy camp comes William Corder, to buy a mysterious, potent poison. Ishamael sells William the drug, and follows him to the cottage where Maria is hiding. It has been twelve months since Maria was “a happy village girl,” and her long laments about her status as “a betrayed, a ruined woman, thus scorned,” are plaintive.²⁰⁸ Only Tim and Anne are supposed to know about the birth of Maria’s baby, but they fail as confidants. Anne, significantly, tells the Martens. The strength of a Mrs. Marten’s love endures, as is fitting for a melodramatic mother. The father, however, is not as forgiving. For two pages, Farmer Marten tells Maria that she did “blast all my fond hopes,” she has “fallen never to rise,” and that her “ingratitude has

²⁰⁵ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 11-16.

²⁰⁶ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 15.

²⁰⁷ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 17.

²⁰⁸ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 19.

bleached my head and broken my heart.”²⁰⁹ The depth of Maria’s betrayal and the length of her fall have never been so explicitly explored before. This is harsh, even to the other characters on stage, and as Maria begs for forgiveness on her knees, Dame Marten finally tells her husband to stop “aggravating the dear girl’s misery, she is repentant.”²¹⁰ There is heavy Biblical imagery throughout this passage. The father feels he has been “sacrificed,” and Maria is “the shorn lamb.” “We are all sinners and should be merciful in our judgment,” says Farmer Marten, finally agreeing to forgive Maria and open his home to her once more. The use of “moral admonitions [was] a device” employed by dramatic authors and printers’ hired ghost writers alike, designed to “fend off the persistent complaints of the pious that crime literature was morally poisonous.”²¹¹ This religious moralizing is part of the tradition of crime melodrama, but none of the other Red Barn authors employed it so effectively.

Although Farmer Marten asks Maria to return to the family home, she decides to wait for William Corder, since she has his written promise that they will soon be married. Their baby, however, is ill, and William arrives to presents Ishmael’s poison as if it were medicine from the doctor. Maria administers the potion, the baby convulses and dies, and William tells the audience, “I am safe.” Ishmael, peering in the window, pronounces a different judgment: “No, lost eternally in the sight of heaven. Another step on the ladder of crime.”²¹² Although other playwrights implied such scenes, none of the other authors thought to actively navigate the tearful world of the Marten reunion, or to dramatize the

²⁰⁹ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 21.

²¹⁰ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 20-21.

²¹¹ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 49.

²¹² Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 23.

killing of the baby. It is to John Latimer's credit that he saw the potential for dramatic and heart-rending scenes in the blank spaces left by other playwrights.

William decides to bury the baby in the woods, and Latimer shows a stricken Maria unwillingly assisting in digging the little grave, observed by the ever-present Ishmael. Maria disappears while William, in an clunky but necessary moment, just happens to pass the gypsy camp as they make plans to burn down his barn. Realizing the truth of Ishmael's identity, William crosses the fields to reach the farm first. He does not care about the property, since it is fully insured. He does, however, shoot and kill Ishmael. William escapes; the gypsies swarm to Ishmael's side. The dying old man manages to speak beautiful "gypsy" nonsense about mystic relics and home among the stars. Substantively, though, he also says, "Swear to seek out my son... tell him to relentlessly pursue the path of vengeance." The remaining gypsies sing a "solemn dirge... lighted only by the red glare of the burning farm."²¹³ There is nothing new about a mysterious son, who disappeared years ago, and must now return to avenge the deaths of both a murdered father and a pre-deceased, seduced sister. The compilation of the villain's sins is not surprising. But visualizing this scene moment by moment, full of fire, gunshot, and haunting music, is thrilling. Latimer's sense of the "theatrical" is keen. The curtain descends on the end of the second act with a murder, but it is not the heroine's. Two-thirds of the way through the play, the young woman is still alive.

The third act picks up where the other two plays began: in the Marten kitchen, with Maria hoping her William will come see her soon. Arriving, William tells Maria she must go with him, in disguise, to London to be married. However, as soon as she is off stage, William tells the audience something new: "My mad gambling speculations have

²¹³ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 25-30.

lost me a once ample fortune, a rich marriage can only save me.”²¹⁴ On both sides of the Atlantic, the melodrama movement tackled issues of social reform. For example, the dangers of alcohol were frequent subjects of temperance-minded melodramas, especially in America,²¹⁵ but gambling was also attacked frequently. Just a few years prior to William Corder’s trial, the trial of John Thurtell spawned its own briefly popular melodrama, *The Gamblers*, in 1823. (During William Corder’s trial, there were numerous attempts to compare the two killers, although bookish Corder and ex-prize-fighter Thurtell had almost nothing in common.) Thurtell was convicted of murdering a gambling acquaintance, in a rather sloppy fashion, after falling deep into debt. With a heavy hand, the author of *The Gamblers* pointed out the evils of gambling, but he was not alone. Additionally, the Royal Coburg Theatre produced a play advertised as “An entirely new melodrama of intense interest, founded on facts, to be called, *The Hertfordshire Tragedy! Or, The Victims of Gaming!!*”²¹⁶ How many other theatres might have been producing Thurtell-Hunt plays is unclear, but a myriad of unrelated poems, plays, and books containing the watchword “gambler” (or “gaming”) showed up at this time, indicating that gambling was a social ill of considerable concern. It would remain so

²¹⁴ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 32.

²¹⁵ *The Drunkard*, written by William H. Smith, is the obvious choice for the top of the temperance play list. “Smith’s play was almost the first of the more than 100 American temperance plays listed [in *Nineteenth Century American Drama: A Finding Guide*, by Don L. Hixon and Don A. Hennessey (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1977)] and the most popular until 1858, when the dramatization of T. S. Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* took that title.” From the UVA Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities website: <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/sentimnt/drunkardhp.html>

²¹⁶ Advertisement. “Royal Coburg Theatre.” 15 Jan 1824. Original image reproduced in Borowitz, *The Thurtell-Hunt Murder Case*, 130. This script appears to be lost, but the advertisement provides details. Authenticity was a concern for the Surrey and the Royal Coburg. Unable to acquire the murderer’s horse, the Royal Coburg lays its stake to authenticity by claiming to represent the historical location of the events, “New Scenery, Taken from Views on the Spot... Gill’s Hill Lane by Night... View of the Cottage and Stable with the Fatal Pond.”

throughout the nineteenth century. In this light, the gambling debt in Latimer's Red Barn play is completely fictitious but understandable. Although it is a lesser point of concern when compared to problems of lust and lost virtue, it maintains William's monetary theme. William, who thus far has achieved his plans by buying goods and services, even offers to pay Tim for the loan of a pick and a spade, asking Tim to "change a five pound note." Tim exclaims, "I never seed [sic] one in all my life!"²¹⁷ William promises to pay Tim nine pence, at a later date. William's world of money is not something the rustic country folk can access.

The comic country folk are poor and ill-educated, but they are clever, funny, and lively. Latimer gives Tim and Anne an extra song-and-dance scene unlike anything in the other Red Barn plays. It is, however, almost identical to an exchange found in John Buckstone's 1826 "domestic melodrama," *Luke the Labourer*. The country lad plans to go to London, but the country lass wants him to stay and bribes him with tasty pudding. Tim Bobbin is caught in a "pull London, pull pudding" scene lifted, nearly word-for-word, from the final passage of Buckstone's first act, featuring "Bobby" and "Jenny."²¹⁸ It seems there is no way to know exactly why Latimer avoided directly copying the Digges script and instead chose to copy from Buckstone. Perhaps this is a tribute to the power of Buckstone's play, which "cut the pattern for native [British] melodrama."²¹⁹ Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery.

²¹⁷ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 36.

²¹⁸ John Baldwin Buckstone, "Luke the Labourer; or, The Lost Son." *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J.O. Bailey. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966: 244.

²¹⁹ J.O. Bailey, *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, New York: The Odyssey Press, 1966: 239. Quoting Winton Tolles.

Act three, scene two is the most strangely quilted, uneven scene in the entire play, for as soon as Anne and Tim sing their duet and leave, William Corder arrives to speak a verse monologue about his impending act. Tim re-enters with the pick and shovel, which William borrows, and then William leaves. Without a pause, Latimer brings on Maria, in men's clothes, hugging Anne. By the time Latimer wrote his play, it seems, the "Maria-in-male-attire" scene was a standard part of the story. Tim sees them, and the girls have their fun at his expense. At the end of this scene, however, Tim sits down and cries. For the first time, Anne feels bad that she teased Tim, and explains Maria's disguise. In the Swansea script, this is neither explored nor explained, and in the Digges script Tim passes judgment on Maria for "wearing the breeches," but Latimer treats the scene a little differently. Tim does not condemn Maria for her attire, or associate her clothes with any particular personality trait. He is not offended or intimidated. But this does not mean that he finds trousers appropriate for ladies. "Maria, in them things em bobs. Ecod, it beats cockfighting," he declares.²²⁰ This is a purely comic moment in Latimer's play, although because it is comic, perhaps Maria's trousers are more easily dismissed and less of a threat to gender boundaries.

Maria, meanwhile, finally arrives at the Red Barn. The audience has had to wait through three and a half acts to reach this pivotal moment. The murder scene itself is not very different from those of the earlier plays. Maria, we learn, had threatened to tell Constable Ayers about the baby's death and secret burial. Perhaps the fact that Latimer introduces the real constable's proper name shows that he was, after all, personally familiar with the original story. William has dug a grave and lets Maria know her fate is imminent. As expected, Maria begs for her life and then, assured that "Heaven will surely

²²⁰ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 39.

nerve my arm to battle for my life,” she seizes William first. The two struggle until William manages to shoot her. The audience has finally gotten to witness the events promised in the play’s subtitle: *The Murder in the Red Barn*. As Maria lies dying, she is granted a final monologue. She warns that justice will find William and strike him down. And yet, with almost Christ-like selflessness, she adds, “With my last breath I die blessing and forgiving thee.”²²¹ Latimer is determined that all the world should love Maria for exactly the traits the other characters lack.

The start of Act Four features another familiar scene. Dame Marten, taking a nap in her chair, dreams. “Slowly the wall of the cottage fades away showing the Red Barn.” Maria and William re-enact the scene in the barn, and just before William pulls the trigger, Dame Marten “wakes with a scream. The vision vanishes.”²²² Here, Marten expresses a marked skepticism about dreams. The historical Mr. Marten, it seems shared this feeling. Mrs. Marten, in an interview with James Curtis, told him that she had recurring dreams repeatedly from Christmas onward, “but she did not tell her husband of it, because he was extremely faithless in regard to matters of this sort.” Indeed, Mr. Marten knew of Mrs. Marten’s dreams for months before he was “goaded by the daily importunity of his wife” to search the barn.²²³ In the play, Dame Marten does not wait. She tells her husband, “I will be satisfied as to the fate of our child... What, you hesitate? Nay then, I go myself.”²²⁴ It is only then, to preserve his status as head of the house, that Mister Marten shanghai the cowardly Tim into accompanying him to the barn with a

²²¹ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 40-41.

²²² Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 42.

²²³ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 247.

²²⁴ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 43.

pitchfork. The second scene of Act Four features Mister Marten and Tim scouring the barn for clues. They find, in quick succession, a blood-stained pick and spade, a pistol bearing William's name, disturbed earth, and Maria's necktie. It is Tim who unearths her body. Unlike the other plays, Marten is given just a few lines to express his sorrow and anger. Latimer has no desire, it seems, to wallow in sorrow here. Mister Marten's entire lament is this: "Oh my poor poor child! But justice shall take the place of tears, justice, justice! For if justice in England be not dead / This deed shall cost William Corder's head." Even Tim is allowed to ruminate about justice. "And if justice in England be of use / This deed shall cook Corder's goose."²²⁵ Mister Marten rushes from the barn, and fearful Tim is left behind.

Meanwhile, William has moved to London. Act Five opens in the drawing room of his London home. Curiously, Latimer chose not to feature William cooking eggs, the famous moment that appears in all the other retellings. William informs the audience, "I have married a wealthy and accomplished lady, and as soon as all is complete we will leave England forever."²²⁶ The actual William Corder had, it seems, planned to go with his wife to visit her friends in France. *John Bull Magazine* reported "At his house [was] found a passport for France, dated the 17th of December last."²²⁷ This is not entirely surprising, as Corder's wife had worked in France as a governess, "and had remained some time on the Continent."²²⁸ At the same time, any accused murderer holding a

²²⁵ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 45-46.

²²⁶ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 47.

²²⁷ "Horrid Murder," *John Bull Magazine*, 27 April 1828.

²²⁸ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 291.

passport for a foreign trip would be seen as a flight risk. The prosecution did not let this observation pass.

Latimer's fictional William begins to have pangs of guilt as his servant describes watching a convicted murderer pass the house on his way to execution. Then, as gypsy music slowly starts to filter through the air, Pharos Lee enters and begins a sequence of questioning. William denies knowing anyone from Polstead named Ayers or Mathews (the only time Mathew's name appears), and only admits to having once met Maria at the village fair. Pharos Lee is more clever than William, however.

- Lee: My name is Lee, I am a Bow Street Officer. Maria Marten has been murdered and her body found.

(Gipsy music very loud.)

- Corder: But if her body has been found in the Red Barn what is this to do with me?

- Lee: I did not say *where* her body had been found.²²⁹

The trap worked. But why should gypsy music accompany the appearance of the stalwart officer of the law? Because John Latimer, in his need to create a theatrically appealing closed circle, has re-invented the officer. Pharos Lee warns William that he will have to answer in heaven for more than one crime, and then reveals that he is the son of the murdered gypsy Ishmael, and brother to the broken-hearted Zella! "On my father's grave I took the oath of vengeance to hunt you down. I joined the Law to complete my task."²³⁰ This is complete and utter fiction.

The historical Officer Lea appears in print as a coolly professional person. Officer Lea certainly had no personal interest in the case. Pharos Lea was part of a system of law enforcement in Britain that would seem far removed from the orderly, organized, and fair experience demanded today. "The law of England was not deliberately formulated with

²²⁹ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 48.

²³⁰ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 49.

conscious social purpose. It accumulated capriciously,” says Sandra Lee Kerman in her introduction to selections from the *Newgate Calendar*. Before 1688, there were about fifty classes of felonies. By the start of the nineteenth century, there were over two hundred. Laws were frequently passed in response to a particular incident, and the result was that “trivial and major crimes alike were often capital offenses.”²³¹ The system was badly in need of both reform and regulation, which slowly began to take shape throughout the nineteenth century. Tolerance waned for activities like drunken behavior in court and the taking of bribes. James Curtis repeatedly praises Lea, calling him a model of proper behavior. In just one example, Curtis described the scene at Corder’s lodgings during the inquest: “A great number of other persons were extremely anxious to see the prisoner, so that Lea, had he been so minded, might have reaped a rich harvest by collecting ‘indulgence fees,’ but he too well understood his duty to be thus tampered with.”²³² Even West Digges wrote in his Preface that Lea was “that worthy officer.”²³³ In 1829, just a year after the Red Barn case, the Metropolitan Police Act was passed, conferring authority on a centralized, uniformed police force in London. Parliament passed other legal Acts, as well, designed to clarify the criminal code and provide the law enforcement agents with the tools needed to establish order.²³⁴ Latimer was writing as the legal system gradually became more orderly.

²³¹ Sandra Lee Kerman, “Introduction,” *The Newgate Calendar, or Malefactor’s Bloody Register* (New York: Capricorn Books: 1962): viii-xi. For instance, in the 1700s, it was a felony, punishable by death, to steal fruit that had been harvested, but it was only a misdemeanor to pick fruit oneself and steal it.

²³² Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 13. Curtis reports numerous other examples of Lea’s upright behavior in a similar fashion.

²³³ Digges, *The Red Barn*, 3.

²³⁴ In 1836 an Act was passed that made it a crime to conceal the birth of a baby. When William buries the baby’s body, he warns Maria, “Remember the penalty of concealment of birth.” (Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 25.) The date of Latimer’s play, then, can be absolutely no earlier than 1836. I think it was much

In life, legal proceedings had to begin with the coroner calling for a full-blown inquest, a proceeding similar to an American grand jury. At the coroner's inquest, the local authorities and a small coroner's jury listened to testimony from the coroner and witnesses, before deciding to issue an arrest warrant. In the nineteenth century, a coroner was under the direct control of the local Justice of the Peace [JP]. If a coroner held an inquest deemed "unnecessary," the JPs could refuse to pay the coroner for his time and travel. "Since inquests were expensive, the JPs wanted inquests on bodies only when there were signs of violence or a real mystery about the cause of death."²³⁵ William Corder was unfortunate enough to have committed a murder that was deemed both violent and mysterious. Maria Marten's body was discovered in such an unusual state that the coroner, John Wayman, immediately responded by rounding up a jury and taking them all to view Marten's remains, still lying inside the Red Barn. "The inquest then proceeded to the Cock public-house for the purpose of inquiring into the cause of her death," writes James Curtis.²³⁶ When it became clear that Corder was the prime suspect, the proceedings were temporarily adjourned and warrants issued for his arrest. Ayres tracked Corder to London through an unusual connection. "He learned from his brother-in-law (Gardner), with whom Corder had been on terms of close intimacy, that if he called at No. 6, Gray's Inn Terrace, he would find a person with whom the prisoner had formed a connexion." Ayres went first to the Police Office, Lambeth-Street, knowing it

later, given that Latimer's characters did not need to elaborate on this point, and given Slater's generational description of how he acquired the manuscript.

²³⁵ Mary Beth Emmerichs, "Getting Away with Murder?: Homicide and Coroners in Nineteenth Century London," *Social Science History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 94.

²³⁶ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 7. It should be mentioned that Maria's body was reburied after it was discovered and was disinterred before the August trial. Lawton was unavailable for the disinterment, so John Charles Nairn and Henry Robert Chaplin, two other surgeons, were present on that occasion. The surgeons removed the corpse's head, jaw, heart and ribs, all of which were entered into evidence during the trial. See Curtis, pages 135-141 and 149-155.

would be best to have local support. “Lea, an active and intelligent officer, was immediately dispatched.” At Gray’s Inn Terrace the policemen met Corder’s new brother-in-law, Mr. Moore, who was able to direct them to the Grove House Academy, where William Corder was apprehended.²³⁷

Once Corder was delivered to Polstead, the coroner’s inquest resumed. Polstead coroner John Wayman was not a medical man, although this was not unusual. “Until 1926, the only qualification for election or appointment as a coroner was the possession of property,” explains Mary Beth Emmerichs.²³⁸ Wayman was, however, wise enough to send for a doctor. When the full court convened for the trial in August, the Counsel for the Crown, Mr. Andrews, called John Lawton to give testimony of a medical nature. Lawton was a surgeon in nearby Boxford, and had been summoned to examine Marten’s body when it was first unearthed. It is surprising that a surgeon was available at all. Before 1836, medical experts were not compensated for their time and efforts, making their participation doubtful. Even in Westminster, where the coroner held 300 inquests in 1842, only 18 doctors were summoned and only four portmortem examinations were ordered.²³⁹ In this light, the thoroughness of the provincial authorities and the medically detailed court testimony is striking. In the Marten case, Lawton and two other surgeons also decided to remove, and preserve, the corpse’s head, heart, and ribs, all of which were entered into evidence during the trial. It is interesting that none of the playwrights chose to dramatize any of the potentially stunning court scenes. Perhaps exhibiting a corpse’s

²³⁷ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 10.

²³⁸ Emmerichs, “Getting Away with Murder,” 95. The first London coroner to be medically qualified was Thomas Wakley, who took the position in 1840. Wakley warned of miscarriages of justice caused by unqualified coroners and eventually also founded the prestigious journal *Lancet*.

²³⁹ Emmerichs, “Getting Away with Murder,” 97.

semi-decomposed head was a bit too macabre, either for an East End melodrama house or a provincial tour. At the time of the trial, these proceedings certainly appealed to the court room spectators; men and women filled the court room, climbed to the roof to peer through skylights, stood on stone window-ledges, and pressed against the building's side window glass with such force that some of the panes shattered.²⁴⁰ A case that could compel an audience like this in the countryside practically assured a dramatic adaptation would find success. None of the theatrical adaptations, however, show a single scene inside a court room. In Latimer's version, the vengeance of Pharos Lee is satisfied just by William's arrest. He has no doubt that the upcoming trial will lead to a conviction.

The audience discovers William in his prison cell in Act Five. Naturally, he has been convicted and is awaiting execution. As he tries to rest, the ghost of Maria appears to him, demanding to be recognized and reminding him that "the all-seeing eye was on your every action." William wakes, shaken, only to find that Mister Marten has come to pay him a visit with a surprising message: "I came not to triumph, I pity and forgive you."²⁴¹ William is touched and tormented, and confesses on the spot that he did kill Maria, but rather than offer the straightforward jailhouse confession of the real Corder, William describes a series of vivid and horrible dreams more poetically dramatic than the real sequence of events. Mister Marten is more determined than ever, "I would not have your conscience for all the gold the world would give. Repent, repent, ere it be too late!"²⁴² Anne and Tim, however, are not as magnanimous. By Act Five, scene four, they have returned to set the scene. Anne has done nothing but cry over her sister's death at

²⁴⁰ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 142-143.

²⁴¹ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 51-52.

²⁴² Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 53.

William's hand. "Shouldn't I like to pull his legs for killing our Maria," she exclaims.²⁴³ This reference is elucidated by a little knowledge of hanging in the nineteenth century. If the condemned man was lucky, the noose would cause his neck to snap and death would be instantaneous. Other times, the noose strangled the convict. In order to speed along death, a hangman would pull the body to tighten the noose, just as was done in the case of William Corder. The gallows at Bury St Edmunds was "exceedingly simple, and much smaller than the ponderous machine used at Newgate," so the hangman was able to reach higher than the legs. "Immediately he was suspended, Ketch grasped the culprit round the waist, in order to finish his earthly sufferings."²⁴⁴ Anne does not get to hasten William's passing, however. Latimer ends his play just before the hanging. As William stands on the scaffold, Maria's ghost appears beside him. The script again invites a tableau. Curiously, Tim's plaintive voice then interrupts the scene. Just before the curtain falls, he calls out, "I want my ninepence, I want my ninepence."²⁴⁵ Perhaps this shows that William's earthly debts are not fulfilled. Perhaps it invites the audience to imagine that Tim might, actually, interrupt the hanging. For whatever reason, Tim is the last character the audience hears.

The longevity of the Red Barn's touring life indicates that audiences approved of the plays in general. At least on the British touring circuit, melodrama were not fully replaced by the "new interest in social plays"²⁴⁶ anytime during the nineteenth century. Latimer's impressive "Mammoth Theatre" was not the only touring company including

²⁴³ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 54.

²⁴⁴ Curtis, *The Mysterious Murder*, 234-235. "Jack Ketch" was evidently a legendary hangman, but the name became a generic pseudonym used by hangmen who wish to keep their real identities hidden.

²⁴⁵ Latimer, *Maria Marten*, 55.

²⁴⁶ Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse*, 239.

Red Barn plays amongst their melodramatic offerings. Ebley's Olympic Touring Theatre, started in 1879, took theatrical performances to country towns without resident playhouses. Decades later, a writer recalled seeing the Ebley company: "I was a stage struck youth and we used to prowl around the van on a Sunday afternoon seeking to catch a glimpse of our adored heroine.... We had three hours entertainment for threepence. In nine months Ebley's company must have put on 200 different plays. The first play I ever saw them in was *The Rocking Stone of Pontypridd*.... the second was *Llewelyn, the Last of the Welsh Princes*. Other plays included... *Maria Marten, Dumb Man of Manchester, The Octoroon*... *Twm Shon Catti. The Maid of Cefn Ydfa, Faust, Hamlet, Merchant of Venice*..."²⁴⁷ Despite growing demands for realism from some quarters, melodramas continued to delight with their spectacles.²⁴⁸ It should not be surprising to see Maria Marten's story acted by the same players who would take on Shakespeare and Boucicault. Although the quality of touring companies was not guaranteed, the larger ones seem to have been comprised of moderately talented performers. They carried Maria's story into the twentieth century.

²⁴⁷ Price, "Portable Theatres in Wales, 1843-1914." The memoirist notes that the touring players could not produce new works because they could not afford royalties. The choice of old works is interesting. The plays of Shakespeare were standards, even if they were usually performed in an edited version. The *Faust* is likely a take on Marlowe's play. Maria Marten is by now familiar to the reader. Boucicault's *The Octoroon* was a smash hit, while the *Duumb Man of Manchester* was written by B. F. Rayner and published in 1838 (text available for download through the Lacy's Acting Edition of Victorian Plays project <http://www.worc.ac.uk/victorian/victorianplays/volume26.htm>). Ebley's company seems to have had an interest in Welsh culture, as the other plays are all about Welsh subjects. Twm Shon Catti was a Welsh Robin Hood type, while the Maid of Cefn Ydfa, aka Ann Thomas Maddocks, supposedly fell in love with a local poet and died of heartbreak when forced to marry another man. There is a balanced rocking stone in Pontypridd, possibly sacred to Welsh druids, and the "Last of the Welsh Princes" is pretty self-explanatory.

²⁴⁸ Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse*, 239.

Chapter 5: Epilogue and Conclusion

There was obviously much public interest surrounding the Red Barn events of 1828. This interest long outlived the victim or villain. When Madame Tussaud's wax museum settled on Baker Street in London in 1835, she added a figure of William Corder to her "chamber of horrors."²⁴⁹ In the last third of the nineteenth century, marionette shows found the story of Maria Marten was the "most popular of all." The case appears consistently in the repertoires of at least ten British companies.²⁵⁰ As late as 1867, the *New York Times* published a narrative account of the events.²⁵¹ In 1902, a British silent-film version of the tale was released. A ten-minute Red Barn film followed in 1908, and another movie version came out in 1913, starring Elisabeth Risdon in what appears to be her first movie role. The final melodramatic celluloid incarnation seems to have been made in 1935. At age 50, veteran melodrama actor Tod Slaughter played William Corder.²⁵²

Even after the advent of film, stage adaptations of the Red Barn play continued to appeal to theatre-going audiences. As Richard Altick explains, "There was a revival of it

²⁴⁹ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 99.

²⁵⁰ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 96.

²⁵¹ Matthew Arnold, "Current Literature: The Red Barn," *The New York Times*, 3 Nov 1867, p2. This account of the murder and subsequent trial relies heavily on pamphlets and the Curtis book, but does not credit sources. The Red Barn article is not "hard" news. It shows up alongside a discussion of *Jane Eyre*, the virtues of plain-looking women, some forgettable poems, and several columns of horsemanship advice.

²⁵² Elisabeth Risdon could claim more than 140 credited roles between 1913 and 1956, including parts in a 1947 adaptation of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and the Humphrey Bogart gangster film *High Sierra*. Tod Slaughter was a veteran of the English stage, having played melodrama villains since 1905. A title search of the Internet Movie Database website (www.imdb.com) will bring up links to information on all four Red Barn movies.

at the Elephant and Castle, London, as late as the 1920s.”²⁵³ And in the 1930s, some theatrical version of the Red Barn story was playing to crowds in New York. *New York Times* reviewer Brooks Atkinson was clearly not impressed, calling it “a stew of foolishness,” “the old melodrama,” and “the chief prank of the evening.” Nevertheless, he indicates that the “bombastic, maudlin yarn of villainies and virtues, concluding with a turgid hangman’s scene” met with approval from the audience. He further observed, “In the crises the actors occasionally appeal to the audience for counsel, and the response is thoroughly upright and spontaneous.”²⁵⁴ The 1936 production was thoroughly separated from its source material and its physical home. Its antiquated messages of justice and virtue were no longer relevant in quite the same way. This audience had faced down one World War, complete with the horrors of trench warfare and mustard gas, and was slogging through the worst economic depression in memory. Yet something compelled them to attend. It is possible that whatever version was presented to an urban New York crowd tapped into the same sense of lost innocence that the London plays had worked upon. Perhaps, if London itself figured into the plot, the American audience might have thought of it as magical and dangerous, a seductive foreign city, not unlike the rural audiences of the nineteenth century. Atkinson’s insistence on calling the show “a prank,” “a yarn” is striking. Most likely, this Red Barn play no longer needed to carry real warnings or real facts. It was pure entertainment, fun in its simple old-fashioned way.

The extant Red Barn plays, however, provide a unique window into the world of nineteenth-century theatre. Often plays must be lumped together and broad

²⁵³ Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, 93.

²⁵⁴ Brooks Atkinson, “The Play: ‘Murder in the Old Red Barn’ in Fifty-fifth Street, or a Drama Critic’s Saturday Night,” *New York Times*, 3 Feb 1936, pp 20.

generalizations about audiences make it easier to discuss any historical period. But the three Red Barn scripts that have been identified here demonstrate the ways in which a story was continually altered out of consideration for location as well as time. The historical event, which was initially transmitted primarily through press reports, *had* to be altered for the stage, and the dramatists translated those details that they felt were most compelling, most current, or most authentic. At the same time, the power of the phrase “founded on facts” and the lengths to which the early playwrights would go to establish authenticity, and the degree to which later playwrights abandoned historical accuracy, provides insight into the assumptions authors made regarding their ability to sell their dramatic output to their intended audiences. In the end, the audience for a true crime melodrama is not interested in what happens, but how it happens. The staging effects used in Red Barn plays were flexible enough to suit theatres endowed with either simple or complex scenic systems. Like it or not, audiences have expectations for the events they attend. In the end, if the melodramatic playwright is to satisfy audience members, that playwright must take them on a compelling, fulfilling journey. The Red Barn plays were able to provide audiences with this experience, playing on general desires for family, innocence, comedy, danger and, ultimately, justice.

The Red Barn story was adapted so many times, played so many different theatres, and spread so far across England (and, eventually, to the United States), that it should not be shrugged off. The history of the Red Barn is also the history of the nineteenth century popular theatre. There is only one Douglas Jerrold, and only one *The Rent Day*, but there were many, many Red Barn plays. The existence of three distinct, extant examples that can be used to demonstrate not only how the story was adapted

within months of the historical murder trial but also how it progressed around England and over time make the Red Barn a unique subject, even among crime melodramas. Adaptations responded to their settings and situations, and understanding how helps to understand the way the theatre world worked. A dramatic turn that was effective in London would have to be changed for Wales, and the touring company was able to capitalize on a different set of experiences all together.

The Red Barn offers a scaffold on which to hang questions of the cultural experiences of people who are often given little space in the historical record – the choices made by obscure but popular playwrights, the talents of work-a-day actors, and the circumstances of audiences from urban centers to provincial towns. The plays are curiously full of interesting and obscure references calculated to appeal to specific audiences, and pose any number of interesting points of departure for a modern scholar. The presence of police officers, matrimonial advertisements, foreigners, gypsies, ghosts, and carnival side-shows all offer angles and entry points for scholars to investigate the way the nineteenth-century popular theatres and audiences viewed their own world.

This very old murder still crops up in very modern places. New Red Barn books were issued throughout the 1940s, and even more recently, although most do little more than rehash James Curtis’s narrative.²⁵⁵ When the Corder house, still standing, was put up

²⁵⁵ A word of caution should be issued regarding a book by Donald McCormick, published in 1967. *The Red Barn Mystery: Some New Evidence on an Old Murder* is a delightful read but a factual fraud. McCormick offers much “evidence” that does not actually exist. Central to his argument is untraceable correspondence between an actress and William’s sister. McCormick did not realize, or care, that William’s sister died several years prior to the dates he gives for the mysterious letters. McCormick paints William Corder as a sympathetic young man, seduced in London by a half-Jamaican part-time prostitute and gang leader named Hannah Fandango, and encouraged by painter and accused poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. McCormick also asserts that William was innocent; he claims Maria was really killed by a minor criminal called “Beauty” Smith. (Historically, Smith did know Corder and was eventually transported to Australia for thieving.) McCormick admitted in the 1980s that he felt facts should

for sale in October of 1989, the real estate advertisements casually referred to the Red Barn crime. There is hardly a website that refers to Polstead without mentioning the murder, and the Moyse's Hall Museum website makes newspaper clippings and macabre memorabilia available online. This year marks the one hundred and eighty year anniversary of the Red Barn trial. The Red Barn case still raises readers' curiosity. The plays should do the same.

not get in the way of a good story. He is well known and generally reviled among Jack-the-Ripper experts for his Ripper "evidence" which has also proven to be fictional.

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