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### Spring-heeled Jack: The Diverging Character of an Urban Monster

First identified in January of 1838, Spring-heeled Jack became an urban monster and literary persona that captured incredible media attention in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Though beginning as a ghostly apparition, Jack emerged as a dapper gentleman with fiery eyes and claws after his 1838 debut in *The Times*. In the following decades, Jack appeared in inexpensive Gothic literature, growing to personify the aristocratic Gothic villain. However, in the 1860s and 1870s, his persona splintered between “realistic” sightings and fictional interpretations. Gradually, Jack retreated to the shadows, becoming a fictitious model for emerging monsters. The case of Spring-heeled Jack offers commentary on the role of popular media and literature in the evolution and continuation of local monsters. The legend of Spring-heeled Jack grew from humble rumor to sensational proportions, a product of his environment rather than his consistent villainy. Though his more “realistic” persona maintained a fearsome reputation, his literary alternative developed in relation to literary trends. These trends informed his evolution and influenced the development of certain qualities and skills adopted by witness reports.

Though initial sightings of Spring-heeled Jack are often attributed to Sr. John Cowen’s publication in *The Times* on January 8, 1838, reports began before a name was created for the assailant.<sup>1</sup> Similar report date back to the Spring of 1837 and can retroactively be considered as

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Bell, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 20.

the origin of the villain. Rumors began to circulate in the city of Barnes on the southwestern edge of London that an apparition of a white bull attacked a number of women. As the monster traveled, it took varying shapes. In East Sheen the apparition appeared as a white bear and in Ham and Petersham the monster presented itself as an “Evil One.”<sup>2</sup> After traveling north of the Thames, the being startled as “an unearthly warrior clad in armor of polished brass, with spring shoes and large claw gloves.”<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of a trickster appearing with claws and plated armor continued in the following months. It was initially believed that “Jack” was not a single person but a group conducting pranks, and that his pattern of attacks mirrored travel on the Great Western railway, moving nearer and nearer to the metropolis. As early as December 28, 1837, the *Morning Chronicle* published that “some scoundrel, disguised in a bearskin, and wearing spring shoes, has been seen jumping to and fro before...in the neighborhood of Lewisham.”<sup>4</sup> This adoption of inhuman dexterity earned the creature the title of Spring-heeled Jack. By December of 1837, urbanites associated any small movement in the shadows with this urban monster. Reports increased exponentially as copycats took advantage of the spirit of fear. Therefore, the official announcement in 1838 only transitioned rumor to printed news, converting street gossip to the conversation of respectable circles.

In February of 1838, Spring-heeled Jack appeared in London for the first time. On February 20, Jack assaulted Jane Alsop at her home in Bearbinder while her mother and father lay sick in bed. The encounter began when Jane answered a knock at the door. Finding what appeared to be

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Bell, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 21.

a police officer, she felt little fear. The officer informed her that Spring-heeled Jack had been sighted on the street and asked for a candle to conduct his search. After retrieving the candle, Jane reported that the man thrust the flame into his chest and “vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flame from his mouth.”<sup>5</sup> His eyes as bright as “balls of fire,” the man preceded to attack Jane, slashing at her neck and arms with his claws and chasing her into the house.<sup>6</sup> Her family, alarmed by the commotion, expelled the figure from the home. This report received immense publicity. The family openly discussed the sightings with the press and reported the incidents to the local magistrate, leading to a police investigation. *The Examiner* published a report on March 4, 1838, that the investigation of two men called Payne and Milbank proved inconclusive.<sup>7</sup> With attacks on the rise and no promising leads in sight, fear spread in urban communities. Overtime, the media created an image for the elusive figure, attributing ferocious characteristics to the urban monster. On March 10, 1838, *The Figaro in London* published a piece titled “Who is Spring-heeled Jack?” The author writes that “by his claws and hideous appearance some have supposed him to be the devil himself.”<sup>8</sup>

Following the attack of Jane Alsop, a servant of Mr. Ashworth of Turner Street and 18-year-old Lucy Scales reported similar assaults by a fire-breathing assailant in the same neighborhood. Author J.S. Mackley argues that while the attacks on Jane Alsop and Lucy Scaled were most likely genuine attacks of either a single individual or a band of miscreants, following reports

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Accidents and Offenses,” *The Examiner*, March 4, 1838.

<sup>8</sup> “Who is Spring-Heeled Jack,” *The Figaro in London*, March 10, 1838.

might be attributed to imitators. On March 25, *The Bells New Weekly Messenger* of London reported that Charles Grenville frightened many women and children by mimicking “silly and dangerous pranks of Spring-heeled Jack.”<sup>9</sup> The police released Grenville, concluding that the man was “weak of mind, but perfectly harmless.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, *The Examiner* reported that on the 8 of April, a “ghost” startled an unsuspecting pedestrian. Mrs. Ann Ansinck recognized the assailant’s voice as 18-year-old James Painter. The copycat was fined £4 for aggravated assault and released from custody. However, many imitators went apprehended. In this way, “Spring-heeled Jack become a convenient scapegoat for unsolved crime.”<sup>11</sup> Reports, fueled by oral rumor, continued to appear in the press during the 1840s and into the middle of the century.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of encounters encouraged a shift from reported news to fictitious narratives in the popular Gothic style.

The term gothic, when applied to literature, is a twentieth-century creation.<sup>13</sup> Though existing prior to the twentieth century, gothic referred to a period of history beginning in the fifth century A.D. when Visigoths invaded the Roman Empire and contributed to its fall. As a result, the term gothic denoted “a long period of barbarism, superstition, and anarchy” and was associated with

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<sup>9</sup> “Foolish Conduct,” *The Bells New Weekly Messenger*, March 25, 1838.

<sup>10</sup> “Spring-heeled Jack,” *The Examiner*, April 8, 1838.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Mackley, “Springheeled Jack: the Terror of London,” *Aeternum: the Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, 3, no.3 (December 2016), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Bell 31.

<sup>13</sup> Jerrold Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Gothic Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

“anything obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish.”<sup>14</sup> The gothic literary genre emerged retroactively, consolidating works with certain features into a unified collection. However, as with every literary genre, defining the Gothic presents a challenge. Still, despite variations, canonical gothic works share certain characteristics. Gothic narratives tend to feature “antiquated spaces,” such as castles, prisons, graveyards, or “urban underworlds.”<sup>15</sup> They are haunted by specters, ghosts, or monsters who threaten the present by invoking terror of the past. Gothic works also reacted to political turmoil, especially the French revolution of 1789.<sup>16</sup> The revolution threatened traditional political organization and aristocrat privilege by attempting to remodel French society. According to author Fred Botting, Gothic fiction emerged from social pressures of the mid-eighteenth century such as the evolving interplay of social classes and the conflict between “landed and commercial power.”<sup>17</sup> As a result of this class struggle, gothic works, holding a primarily middle-class audience, featured aristocratic villains who abused their power.<sup>18</sup> Examples include the works of Ann Radcliff such as, *A Sicilian Romance*, written in 1790. Her writing routinely features a heroine representative of a hopeful bourgeois future who

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<sup>14</sup> Jerrold Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Gothic Fiction*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Hogle, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Hogle, 128.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Botting, and Catherine Spooner, “Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic From the Nineteenth Century to the Present,” (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Hogle, 3.

is victimized by a figure of the traditional order.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, theatres produced gothic plays which featured similar conflicts. Mathew Lewis's *The Castle of the Specter*, released in 1798, displayed the struggle of a "tyrannical yet charismatic aristocrat" attempting to retain personal power.<sup>20</sup>

Though beginning as a local rumor, Spring-heeled Jack developed into a gothic villain. As Spring-heeled Jack gained popularity, fictional entertainment incorporated the monster in sensational plots. Initially, he appeared in chapbooks, a prominent mode of inexpensive literature during the Gothic era. Also called "libels" in the seventeenth century, chapbooks consisted of anywhere from eight to seventy-two pages and contained everything from advice panels, recipes, and song lyrics to traditional fairy tales, adventure stories, and abridged novels, especially of the Gothic variety.<sup>21</sup> These chapbooks, marketed towards the increasingly literate working-class and could be produced and purchased inexpensively.<sup>22</sup> The working-class market influenced the emerging stories. Narratives adopted gothic tropes of class struggle, often "pit[ing] haughty and

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<sup>19</sup> Hogle 46.

<sup>20</sup> Hogle, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Bearden-White, Roy Bearden-White, "A History of Guilty Pleasure: Chapbooks and the Lemoines." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 103, no. 3 (2009), 286; Nevins, 110; Douglass H. Thomson and Diane Long Hoeveler, "Shorter Gothic Fictions: Ballads and Chapbooks, Tales and Fragments," In *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 157.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson and Hoeveler, 151.

deceitful aristocrats against virtuous and long-suffering peasants.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, sightings evolved as the public became familiar with the monster’s literary image. Beginning as ghostly apparitions, Jack later crystallized into a dapper monster intent on frightening common urbanites.

In the 1830s, the gothic era came to a close and chapbooks gradually took on a new name: penny bloods.<sup>24</sup> With the advent of cheap newspapers in the 1830s, inexpensive adult entertainment moved from pamphlets to newspaper columns.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, penny bloods attracted a juvenile audience.<sup>26</sup> They also played with their traditionally gothic roots, mingling

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Nevins, Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero* (California: Praeger, 2017), 110.

<sup>25</sup> John Springhall, “‘A Life Story for the People’? Edwin J. Brett and the London ‘Low-Life’ Penny Dreadfuls of the 1860s,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1990), 230.

<sup>26</sup>This transition of readership invited intense criticism from snobbish literary commentators, clergy members, and magistrates. Mimicking complaints of the earlier chapbooks, dissenters argued that gothic fiction enjoyed by minors encouraged juvenile delinquency (Dunae, 133). An 1890 article in *The Scots Observer* wrote that “the hero of the penny dreadful may be as wicked as he likes... it finds its keenest pleasure in rejoicing in the heroism of revolt and the cowardice, the meanness, the turpitude of authority” (“Penny Dreadfuls”). Since the primary reading audience of penny dreadfuls was lower-class boys, those seen by society as “exhibit [ing] a propensity for delinquency that was entirely lacking in their better educated, more affluent contemporaries,” critics associated readership with increasing criminal activity (Dunae 135). *The Speaker* published an 1890

gothic tropes with more urban influences. Author Jess Nevins explains that they "told stories of adventure, initially of pirates and highwaymen, later concentrating on crime and detection."<sup>27</sup>

By the 1860s, the transition from adult to juvenile readership had cemented fully. The penny blood, now known as the "penny dreadful," published sensational and often "racy" stories for young boys in the gothic tradition.<sup>28</sup> Jack's character in penny dreadfuls, plays, and books changed in the 1860s and 1870s, creating a sanitized persona. This persona diverged from the traditional gothic model, framing Jack as an aristocratic savior rather than villain. In 1863, Alfred Coates, one of many authors who took advantage of Jack's popularity, published *Spring heel'd-Jack: The Terror of London a Romance of the Nineteenth Century*. In Coates' book, "Jack became a hero, a nobleman who put on the disguise for entertainment and ended up helping other people."<sup>29</sup> In this way, the derogatory association of aristocrat and villain popularized in the 1830s gave way to a superhuman figure who, disguised to "[frighten] people out of their wits...instead... finds himself acting the part of the Good Samaritan and all sides—serving by

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article titled "A Literary Causerie" charges that crimes such as these stemmed from the proliferation and popularization of Spring-heeled Jack "trash," enabled by "teaching poor boys to read" ("A Literary Causerie").

<sup>27</sup> Nevins, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Nevins, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Nevins, 108.

kindness rather than killing by fear.”<sup>30</sup> Coates’ Jack, associated with the more “benevolent” qualities, later influenced the trope of the “dual identity.”<sup>31</sup> By day, Jack dons the personality of “The Marquis,” loved by his community. At night, He fights for justice as the hated Spring-heeled Jack, capable of inhuman acts due to his special costume. While certain tropes of the gothic novel, such as the inclusion of sensational storylines or the primacy of middle and working-class readership, the aristocrat and evil Jack was dead.

Even as Spring-heeled Jack took on a friendlier persona in the press, fearful sightings persisted. However, reports differed from those of 1838. Aided by the crystallized portrayal of Jack in inexpensive gothic literature, plays, and books, reports lacked the trademark variations of the 1830s. Influenced by literary descriptions from the previous decades, people noted Jack’s agility and unique costume. Disguised in a dark cape and spring-heeled boots, Jack of the 1860s flew about the city by the power of his special garb.<sup>32</sup> However, this transformation was not complete. Fearsome reports persisted as Jack gained courage during the 1870s. On October 9, 1879, the Hampshire Telegraph reported Spring-heeled Jack assaulted the Aldershot army camp in Hampshire, stealing the hats or rifles of sentry-men.<sup>33</sup> The “evil goblin” apparently had “gained courage from the seeming inability of the military authorities to summarily terminate his

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<sup>30</sup> Alfred Coates, *Spring-heel’d Jack: the Terror of London a Romance of the Nineteenth*

*Century*. Quoted by Jess Nevins, *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victorian* (Austin, TX:

MOmonkeyBrain:2005), 821.

<sup>31</sup> Nevins, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Nevins, 108.

<sup>33</sup> “Spring-Heeled Jack,” *Carlow Sentinel*, October 12, 1878.

mischievous pranks.”<sup>34</sup> The irate columnist berates the military and police for their incompetence, citing their failures to apprehend Jack. In the following years, Jack made a habit of attacking military establishments. His evasion of capture after these attacks attributed a new supernatural power to the character.

These two examples, that of the heroic and altruistic “Marquis” and the ferocious terror of the night, coexisted in popular media and the public mind. In 1870, only seven years after Alfred Coates heroic Jack graced the press, the army set traps on London rooftops to catch Spring-heeled Jack.<sup>35</sup> The urban legend was both feared and fictitious. As Karl Bell describes, he was in a “constant gestation.”<sup>36</sup> Spring-heeled Jack was a product of a “rich cultural tangle,” a constantly shifting configuration of new and old literary traditions which combined with a cultural interest in violent stories.<sup>37</sup> Gothic entertainment flourished in light of this interest and the tales of Spring-heeled Jack remained entertaining. Still, this divide between his literary and “realistic” persona is a key component to the understanding of such a varied character.

By the 1880s and 1890s, reports of encounters dwindled. With every exposure of fraud, the stories of Spring-heeled Jack lost credibility. Entering legendary status, Jack retreated to the shadows. In 1848, *The Northern Echo* published that the region was troubled by a “ghost of the “Spring-Heeled Jack” type,” demounting Jack to a category of ghost rather than an active threat.

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<sup>34</sup> “Portsmouth, Wednesday, October 9,” *Hampshire Telegraph*, October 9, 1878.

<sup>35</sup> Phillip Guerty, 2021, “Monsters and Fairies,” PowerPoint presentation, University of North Georgia, Gainesville, Georgia, December 14, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Bell, 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Spring-heeled Jack became a descriptor, a caricature of his previous self. The *Dragheda Conservative* published a column titled “Spring-heeled Jack on July 28, 1900 which reveals this withdrawal from reality. The author claims that Commandant Dewet was the “Spring-heeled Jack of the Boer army.” It was his prerogative to play “an edifying game of catch-me-if-you-can.”<sup>38</sup> Spring-heeled Jack had become a fable, one sited as a type of assailant or a variety of monster or rather than an active villain. He had become, as an 1884 column in the *Northern Echo* states, “uneasy spirit...of one of the warriors slain long ago.”<sup>39</sup>

To this day, Spring-heeled Jack lives on, his divergent persona intact. Though more readily acknowledged as a literary legend, Jack continues to travel the world, leaving terror in his wake. In 2001, a “mysterious masked creature” with “flaming red eyes and sharp metal claws” attacked late-night pedestrians in East Dehli, India, before vaulting four stories in retreat.<sup>40</sup> As in London, initial attacks most likely occurred, whether by man or animal. As in London, initial attacks were most likely legitimate. Yet, encouraged by a media frenzy and shaped by sensational press descriptions, the “Monkey Man” of India became a modern incarnation of Spring-heeled Jack. Author Massimo Polidoro writes that a “spark is usually enough to start mania.”<sup>41</sup> In England, Spring-heeled Jack benefited from such a “spark.” Beginning as a local nuisance and developing

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<sup>38</sup> “Spring-heeled Jack,” *Dragheda Conservative*, July 28, 1900.

<sup>39</sup> *The Northern Echo*, August 1, 1884.

<sup>40</sup> Massimo Polidoro, "Return of Spring-Heeled Jack, (Notes on a Strange World)," *Skeptical Inquirer*, July-August 2002, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

into a national phenomenon, Jack developed into a dualistic character, influenced by contemporary literature and press coverage.

Today, Spring-heeled Jack offers commentary on the role of entertainment in the creation and continuation of public fears. Prior to his 1838 debut in *The Times*, Jack appeared as ghostly animal apparitions or armor-clad opponents. However, with the creation of a persona, both the press and the public retroactively attributed attacks to the figure. As Jack grew in popularity, appearing in chapbooks, penny bloods, and penny dreadfuls, he became an aristocratic villain, befitting the genre and audience. However, by the 1860s and 1870s, Jack's literary and "realistic" persona fragmented. In popular entertainment, he developed into a heroic, almost superhuman character. Lacking the impetus of a revolutionary catalyst, literary chastisement of aristocracy fell to an emerging interest in morally nuanced superhuman figures. Some argue that Spring-heeled Jack served as the superhero prototype, paving the way for other cape-wearing, crime-fighting heroes with a double-identity.<sup>42</sup> This evolution marks a divergence from his gothic roots and the birth of a new public image. Yet, even as his public persona evolved, local sightings continued to fall back on the literary descriptions of the previous decades. This "realistic" Jack attacked military bases and threatened public safety, utilizing the superhuman enhancements of recent literary releases for evil rather than good. Spring-heeled Jack provides an example of the evolution of a supernatural or superhuman figure across the decades. The division of his persona along literary and "realistic" lines, along with the notable influence of fiction on his public and literary appearances, marks Spring-heeled Jack as a valuable case study of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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<sup>42</sup> Nevins, 108.

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