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DICK TURPIN: THE PRE-POSTMODERN OUTLAW

The iconography of Dick Turpin, an 18th century Essex butcher turned career criminal, has for almost three centuries undergone a complex process of rehabilitation



Much of the Turpin myth was constructed in visual recreations of his persona in film and comic books, and the Turpin now vividly fixed in the popular imagination is a dashing outlaw swashbuckler with a romantic social conscience. This article examines the Turpin legend and explores the role the British Thriller Library comics of the 1950s has played in the evolution of this mythology

Outlines of an outlaw

Richard Turpin was hanged in York in April 1739 after a ten-year criminal career of deer-poaching, violent burglary, highway robbery, murder and horse-theft. At the time of his capture he was the most wanted outlaw in England, but in a historical context he was unique only in his ability to evade justice, and the scaffold, for as long as he did. He belongs in a pantheon of glamorised highwaymen of the 17th and 18th centuries, a subset of criminal society which included the royalist exiles Claude Duval and James Hind, for whom the execution of Charles I in 1649 produced 'the ultimate identification of authority and criminality' (Mackie, 2014, p.76).

Duval and Hind were rumoured to have been particularly successful with women; Duval is believed to have danced with a young lady whose carriage he robbed, and to have provided the musical accompaniment with his own fair voice. The encounter was eternised by the painter William Powell Frith in 1859: Duval has his back to us, arm raised 'en Haut', but the composition directs us to the face of his quarry, whose eyes are glazed with the ecstasy of delighted submission. The exploits of these so-called 'gentleman robbers' were also immortalised by John Gay in his hugely successful *Beggar's Opera* of 1728,

and in the popular collections of criminal 'histories' of the early to mid-18th century. These compendia, with their long, evocative titles, were based in part on the chapbooks written by the orderlies of Newgate prison. The chapbooks detailed, with some accuracy, the chronology of the criminal lives of the condemned and their reflections in the hours and days leading up to their executions, but by the time they had been plagiarised and refashioned as catalogues of criminal histories, these narratives had been embellished with the raffish ornamentation of artistic license.

The editors of the compendia – probably including an early-career Daniel Defoe – also found it difficult to resist stitching the tales together with a thread of moralising disapproval. The editor of one of these collections, a 'Captain Alexander Smith' (Defoe's rumoured nom-de-plume), hoped 'it may be of use in correcting the errors of juvenile tempers devoted to their passions, with whom sometimes danger passes for a certain road to honour, and the highway seems as tempting to them as chivalry did to Don Quixote' (Smith, in Hayward, 2002 [1735], p.28). Whether the readers of these tales consumed them for moral nourishment or for the vicarious thrill of voyeuristic spectacle is open to question. But the public appetite for tales of roguery had been stirred, especially by characters whose criminality was distilled in print as small but heroic rebellions against the unfair distribution of wealth.

Many, like Turpin, began their criminal careers in violent gangs, but there is little narrative heroism to be found in the grim details of torture and mutilation that characterised the brutal, gin-fuelled burglaries on the outskirts of London of the 1720s and 30s. Turpin himself was a large, aggressive man, with a face disfigured by smallpox; his literacy and intelligence allowed him to avoid capture for several years, but he was caught because of a thuggish act of petulance: after shooting his neighbour's rooster, seemingly for his own amusement, he then threatened to blow the head off the chicken's understandably indignant owner.

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The Turpin myth

There is little of the historical Turpin to like, but by the time the history of his life had been printed in the first *Newgate Calendar* in 1779 (a sort of 'greatest hits' compilation of the earlier compendia), the anonymous author had embroidered an important aesthetic detail that did not appear in any of the histories published soon after Turpin's death in 1739. The *Calendar's* biography of Turpin adds: 'The spectators of the execution seemed to be much affected at the fate of this man, who was distinguished by the comeliness of his appearance' (anon., 1779). At a stroke, in one sentence, Turpin becomes a handsome composite of every extant highwayman mythology, and is transfigured from barbarous hoodlum into charismatic martyr.

But it would be nearly 60 years before this transfiguration was fully exploited. A series of Criminal Reform Acts in the 1830s had recalibrated society's attitudes to unlawful behaviour, and many of the crimes Turpin and his ilk had committed were no longer punishable by death. The 1830s and 40s also saw the rise of the Newgate novel – heady escapades which refashioned the criminal lives of the Newgate Calendar into rip-roaring adventures of chivalry and romantic conquest.

William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* features an extended cameo of Richard (now 'Dick') Turpin, an edgy but loveable rogue who fraternises with Romany gypsies and completes an impossible overnight ride to York on a magnificent but fictitious black horse. Ainsworth eulogizes this phantom as if it were a real but extinct idiosyncrasy of an idyllic Chaucerian England. 'With him expired the chivalrous spirit which animated successively the bosoms of so many knights of the road' Ainsworth gushes. 'With him died away that passionate love of enterprise, that high spirit of devotion to the fair sex' (Ainsworth, 1834, p.164).

The myth endures

Yet Turpin's posthumous celebrity was really only just beginning. Cheap chapbooks of folk tales and legends, some with rudimentary woodblock illustrations, had been popular for several centuries. But by the middle of the 19th century, steam-powered printing presses were revolutionising the commodification of the written word and allowing short, entertaining stories to be consumed cheaply and widely.

This was the era of the penny dreadfuls, and the longest-running serialisation by any author to date. Edward Viles' *Black Bess: The Knight King of the Road* (c.1886) took Ainsworth's novel as its inspiration and stretched the Turpin mythology across 254 volumes in five years, complete with illustrations and covers by the prolific Robert Prowse. It even shoehorned a guest star, the nephew of Claude Duval (who had hangd 35 years before Turpin's birth) into the story for good measure.



At the end of the 19th century the penny dreadful had spawned 'libraries' of outlaw adventures with vivid, chromolithographed covers. Turpin had his own 'library' for most of the first decade of the new century, printed by the Aldine Press, and is given a red coat for the first time, an anomaly I will return to later. These tales reappear as pocket-sized threepenny novels in the interwar years, but with a single, meagrely drawn illustration. At the same time, manufacturers like Lambert & Butler were releasing collectible cigarette cards featuring a rogues' gallery of pirates and highwaymen: miniature snapshots of a lush world of glamorous malefaction. It wasn't until the post-war years that Turpin was finally brought to life in comic strips that could do real justice to the evolving perversion of his history.



The thrill of the swashbuckler

The young readers of post-war Britain wanted heroic icons that denoted the dynamism and vigour of a bright new age: the era of the cinema swashbuckler. Dick Turpin had already appeared on the big screen in various guises since the first silent films, and was a mainstay in the imaginations of British youth. But until the Second World War, the movie swashbuckler and the comic 'funnies' were rivals for the attention of the same pocket money.

In the late 1930s, the Scottish publisher D.C. Thompson had successfully collected a cluster of different comics strips in one volume in the *Dandy* and the *Beano*, with an emphasis on slapstick visual humour. But in the 40s, US imports and reprints such as the Alex Raymond phenomenon Rip Kirby and notorious horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* were at the same time inspiring British writers and artists to re-evaluate the potential of the medium, and terrifying parents and teachers into mobilisation and organisation of the forces of censorship. Out of this convergence, *Eagle* was born – an inspired land grab of both the exhilarating and the wholesome which proved hugely lucrative. As James Chapman observes, 'Eagle was formed within the historical conditions and ideological discourses of post-war Britain – the period of the twilight of empire and the founding of the welfare state – and it was imbued with a strong sense of national identity and social responsibility' (Chapman, 2011, p.53). *Eagle's* success set the tone for the 1950s comics market, and its competitors needed to produce cheap alternatives that mirrored its register but offered an alternative focus in their storytelling.

Alfred Harmsworth's Amalgamated Press, which had acquired the rights to the stories in

Aldine's *Dick Turpin Library*, launched their own *Thriller Picture Library* in 1951. The stars of these series were Turpin and Robin Hood, whose serials ran until the end of the decade. Their brash celebrations of monarchy and chivalry can be seen as self-conscious articulations of a nation reasserting its identity as a relevant global power; Britain's former territories had begun to fight for, and gain, independence from the crown, fears were coalescing around the rising power of the Soviet Union, and the protagonist of the swashbuckler, as Chapman puts it, was 'invariably cast in the role of protector of the state against tyranny and subversion' (Chapman, 2011, p.85).

In order to create the rather otherworldly visual tone of an imagined, picaresque England, Amalgamated hired a number of Italian artists from the renowned Milan studio of Rinaldo D'Ami, and the famous British painter Septimus E. Scott, whose vibrant, muscular work was widely recognisable in First World War propaganda material and the railway company posters of the 1920s. Though a rare eye-witness description of Richard Turpin in the 1730s has him dressed in a blue coat, he has almost invariably been painted in the luxurious regimental red of a mid-18th century Royal Dragoons cavalry officer. The cheap, hematite rust red of infantry uniforms had been a standard since Cromwell's New Model Army of the 17th century, but the bright lust-red of the expensive cochineal beetle was reserved for the officer class and above. It is in these covers that the pseudo-military DNA of the Turpin myth rises strangely to the surface – this Turpin is an outlaw, but he is also an officer and a gentleman, with all of the accompanying skillsets that this symbiotic antagonism affords him.



The amorphous legend

The *Thriller Library* Turpin is both the able swordsman of the Errol Flynn swashbucklers and the pensive measured detective of Arthur Conan Doyle: part Robin Hood, part Sherlock Holmes, in adventures which feature, early in the series, run-of-the-mill vignettes of gallantry and social redress. In a 50s Britain insecure and reactionary in the face of increasing immigration from Ireland and the former colonies, broad, aggressively negative racial stereotypes predominate in its popular culture. Turpin is assisted by a fat Irish inebriate called Jem and a comical 'African' known as Beetles, a character played by Britain's first black film star, Ernest Trimingham, in the 1912 silent picture, *The Adventures of Dick Turpin – The King of the Highwaymen*. Both characters speak in the distilled vernacular of the subaltern 'other': the voices of the oppressed and colonised re-purposed for slapstick effect as loyal and grateful allies to the Empire.

The *Dick Turpin Thriller Library* becomes increasingly odd and transgressive as it nears its end, sensing, perhaps, the postmodern upheaval to come, and responding to a changing readership hungry for the gothic, the monstrous and the supernatural. 'Captain' Turpin was now paired in a charged but chaste partnership with a svelte female crime-fighting outlaw called Moll Moonlight (a nod to the popularity of the 1945 movie swashbuckler *The Wicked Lady*), and pitted, in increasingly tongue-in-cheek storylines, against the peculiar and sinister new villain Creepy Crawley, a royal grenadier turned traitor. In *Dick Turpin and the Castle of Peril* (1958), for example, a schizophrenic mash-up of Dracula, King Kong and Red Scare paranoia, Dick and Moll travel to a castle in the wilds of Scotland to confront the evil Russian Count Vronsky and a 100 million year-old defrosted Siberian giant with the strength of twenty men. In the climax, the giant turns on Vronsky, the two plunge to their death from the battlements, and the indebted locals rush to venerate Dick and Moll for ridding them of the strange Soviet menace.



Legacy of an outlaw

Where does this 1950s Turpin sit in the contested space of comics criticism? Irving Howe is dismissive of comic characterisation, which he says 'consists of persistent identification of each name with an outstanding personality trait' and that 'the deepest identification we can feel towards a mass culture hero... is ultimately with our role of social anonymity' (in Heer & Worcester, 2009, p.48). Robert Warshow is less vituperative, conceding that 'perhaps the worst thing [comics] do is meet the juvenile imagination on its crudest level and offer it an immediate and stereotyped satisfaction' (Ibid., p.76). But as Leslie Fielder remarks, 'it is here we begin to see that there is a politics as well as a pathology involved in the bourgeois hostility to popular culture' (Ibid., p.130). Like the character fighting the Siberian giant, Turpin is as much a cypher for the Nietzschean übermensch as he is for Umberto Eco's 'parsifalism' and the 'mythic chastity' that protects the superman from the passage of time.

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T H E
T R I A L
Of the Notorious Highwayman
Richard Turpin,

At York Assizes, on the 22d Day of
March, 1739, before the Hon. Sir WILLIAM
CHAPPLE, Kt. Judge of Assize, and one of
His Majesty's Justices of the Court of King's
Bench.

Taken down in Court by Mr. THOMAS KYLL,
Professor of Short Hand.

To which is prefix'd,
An exact Account of the said *Turpin*, from his
first coming into *Yorkshire*, to the Time of his
being committed Prisoner to *York Castle*; com-
municated by Mr. APPLETON of *Beverley*,
Clerk of the Peace for the *East-Riding* of the
said County.

With a Copy of a Letter which *Turpin* received
from his Father, while under Sentence of Death.

To which is added,
His Behaviour at the Place of Execution, on Saturday the 7th
of April, 1739. Together with the whole Confession he
made to the Hangman at the Gallows; wherein he ac-
knowledg'd himself guilty of the Facts for which he suffer'd,
own'd the Murder of Mr. *Thompson's* Servant on *Epping-
Forest*, and gave a particular Account of several Robberies
which he had committed.

Y O R K:
Printed by WARD and CHANDLER; and Sold at
their Shop without *Temple-Bar*, London; and in *Concy-
Street*, York, 1739. (Price Six-pence.)

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The postmodern highwayman

The spirit of Dick Turpin was to return in the eponymous late 70s British television series as a social crusader – a flicked V sign to Thatcherism hidden in a rollicking Saturday teatime family drama – and in the quasi-pirate new romanticism of 80s pop star Adam Ant. Turpin has been repeatedly reconfigured for purpose in this way; his modern incarnation is fashioned for modern desires. He lives in an odd purgatory, neither alive nor fully dead in the public consciousness, an icon of reinvention who inhabits no fixed point in our imaginations.

'For all his relative coherence,' says Lincoln Faller, 'the heroic highwayman is still something of a shifting and indeterminate figure... he swims in and out of focus as he moves through his texts, and it is finally this significance that determines his usefulness as a cultural symbol' (Faller, p.175). But like the multi-slice imaging of a cultural scan spanning three centuries, an attentive examination still reveals much about the physiology of a rich and enduring myth. From England's most wanted gangster to literary object of desire, from pulp fiction hero to swashbuckling pop culture heartthrob, he has survived these disparate stages of pre-postmodern commodification with his enigma intact. A Dick Turpin for the 21st century can now come out of hiding.



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Keywords

Comics, adaptation studies, Dick Turpin, highwaymen, postmodernism