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Distorting the Genre, Defining the Audience, Detecting the Author: Richard Marsh's "For Debt" (1902)

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Abstract. The author examines the turn-of-the-century debate over prison reform by closely analyzing Richard Marsh's short story "For Debt" (1902). The story presents a powerful critique of imprisonment in a guise acceptable to Marsh's lower-middle-class readership. By blurring the boundaries of fiction, prison autobiography, and investigative journalism, the story further highlights the entertainment value of these genres in the early 1900s.

Literary critics have in recent years devoted a good deal of attention to the nineteenth-century, particularly the late-nineteenth-century, detective story. Several scholars have suggested that by the turn of the century, the amateur detective, as opposed to the highwayman or jailbreaker of the early and mid-nineteenth century, had become the focus of crime fiction. Set in a recognizable, contemporary London, turn-of-the-century detective fiction made frequent reference to actual urban locations and problems, reflecting reader anxiety. Acting as a key to the urban labyrinth, the late-Victorian detective figure then releases this anxiety through sheer logic. In an unstable world, detective fiction offered the reader comfort and the hope that life could in the end be controllable through rationality and knowledge (Belsey, Jann, Knight). Although usually (but not always) a guardian of the law, the detective, importantly, stands clearly aloof from the official police force and conveys an amount of criticism toward it in an era that witnessed some spectacular police failures, including the mishandling of the Bloody Sunday riot of 1887 and the unsolved Jack the Ripper murders of 1888. The popularity of

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detective fiction was not, however, the only sign of a lack of trust in the officers of the law in Britain. In this essay, I examine the late-nineteenth-century debate on prison reform as another indication of public wariness of the law at the turn of the century. Through a detailed discussion of Richard Marsh's short story "For Debt" (1902), I demonstrate that imprisonment remained of interest to the general readership of popular fiction magazines in this period.

The prison had emerged as a viable form of punishment with the decline of the capital sentence in the first half of the nineteenth century, but incarceration had provoked controversy and comment from the start. Prison reform was an important policy issue throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, but it reached its peak in its last quarter, with serious attempts in 1877 to introduce administrative uniformity and in 1895 to guarantee humane conditions in all prisons throughout the country, a period characterized in the history of imprisonment in England as the "Du Cane Regime." Under the leadership of Sir Edmund Du Cane, a concerted effort was made at this time to introduce strict uniformity and administrative efficiency within the prison system. As the joint leader of the Prison Directorate, which had been in charge of the convict prisons since 1850, and of the Prison Commission, formed in 1878 to manage the local jails, Du Cane wielded considerable administrative powers. A fair but strict and inflexible former army officer, he saw the prison as a deterrent to crime and a place of punishment rather than a place of reform or retribution (Radzinowicz and Hood 527). In a spirit of Benthamite utilitarianism, Du Cane and his followers felt that the prison system was not harsh enough to deter the lower orders from criminal behavior (Radzinowicz and Hood 526) and proceeded to supply prisoners with "hard labour, hard board, and hard fare," a phrase coined by Du Cane's predecessor Sir Joshua Jebb. Uniform conditions were introduced throughout the prison system, including the guarantee of uncomfortable cell accommodation, heavy labor, limited food allowances, and lack of intellectual stimulation and communication with other human beings (McConville, "Victorian" 146).

Although administrative uniformity was undoubtedly an improvement on the previous, somewhat erratic, system, Du Cane's regime came under a good deal of criticism. Writing in 1922, Sidney and Beatrice Webb regretted that "[t]o Sir Edmund Du Cane a prisoner was a prisoner, and practically nothing else" (204). Commentators criticized the treatment of young and first-time offenders, political prisoners, debtors, and the insane, and highlighted the social and individual problems caused by imprisonment. The Irish nationalist Michael Davitt deplored this lack of differentiation within the prison system, likening a prisoner within it to a cog in a wheel:

Penal servitude has become so elaborated that it is now a huge punishing machine, destitute [...] of discrimination, feeling, or sensitiveness; and its [...] complete failure in reformative effect upon criminal character, [is] owing to its obvious tendency to deal with erring human beings—who are still men despite

their crimes—in a manner which mechanically reduces them to a uniform level of disciplined brutes. (1: 240)

Many agreed with Davitt that the uniformity that Du Cane sought to achieve was not suited to all classes of prisoner; neither were the methods used to achieve it. The prisoner, according to convicted killer Florence Maybrick, became but “a human automaton. All will, all initiative, all individuality, all friendship, all the things that make human beings attractive to one another, are absent” (66). “[T]he *human* element has no place in such establishments,” complained the pseudonymous No. 77:

A bold, heartless, “hide bound” system—which [. . .] imposes upon all under it a state of existence totally opposed to that which nature has set up as the necessary condition of moral, mental, and physical health—dominates and governs our whole penal economy. Feelings, temperament, affections, have no place in the lifeless code of “rules and regulations” under which more than a hundred thousand human beings are at this moment suffering in England. (70; emphasis in original)

“For all practical purposes a prisoner might be a wooden dummy, with a machine capacity for consuming so much food, and picking a certain weight of oakum per day,” complained F. Brocklehurst in yet another bitter attack against uniformity: “[T]he prisoner is a cog in a wheel. He must not be different from his fellows. Any manifestation of individual tastes or desires is an offence against prison discipline amounting almost to a crime” (17, 65–66).

By the 1890s, prison reform had again become a major policy issue. R. F. Quinton wrote that “[f]or sometime [before 1894] criticism had been free and constant in magazines and newspapers” (191). The prison system was widely debated in the periodical press, and the flood of prison memoirs by former staff and prison autobiography by former convicts, which continued to appear from the late 1870s well into the twentieth century, testifies to its popular appeal.¹ These writings constituted a challenge against the nature of imprisonment in England and particularly the silence and solitude imposed on prisoners. They had a significant impact on the work of the 1895 Gladstone Committee and the subsequent 1898 Prison Act, which emphasized the need for reformatory principles within prison administration, differentiation of various classes of prisoner, and abolition of unproductive labor (Quinton 192). However, it is also important to realize the highly sensational nature of these prison reminiscences as popular entertainment, as indicated by their compelling titles: *Secrets of the Prison House; or, Gaol Studies and Sketches* (1894), by Prison Inspector (and, significantly, popular novelist) Major Arthur Griffiths; *Twenty-Five Years in Seventeen Prisons: The Life-Story of an Ex-Convict*, by No. 7 (1903); *The Mark of the Broad Arrow; or, The Life of a Convict*, by No. 77 (1903); *My Fifteen Lost Years: Mrs. Maybrick's Own Story* (1905); or *The Man They Could Not Hang: His Own Story* (1908), by the probable murderer John “Babbacombe” Lee. Contemporary commentators realized the interest that the public took in imprisonment: while the Reverend

J. W. Horsley opined that “[p]eople invariably are interested in a sort of way in prisons and prisoners” (57), Griffiths found that “the gaol and its inmates possess perennial interest for the public” (1: 1). R. F. Quinton perceived that some of this interest was due to the treatment of the topic in the press and by ex-convicts: according to him, the “subject is one, unfortunately, which lends itself readily to sensational treatment, and the Press ministers freely to the public appetite for the lurid details supplied from all sources” (220–21). Indeed, prison autobiographies and their cinematic adaptations continue to fascinate audiences today through the combination of sensational crime, human suffering, and loss of freedom they offer.

Unsurprisingly, incarceration found its way to the periodicals and novels of the period as well. Because crime fiction often involves a melodramatic battle between the forces of good and evil, it provides interesting reading matter. The popularity of detective fiction at the time has already been mentioned, and escape from prison was a theme effectively tackled by Jacques Futrelle’s popular detective-professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, aka the Thinking Machine, as well as by Maurice Leblanc’s gentleman burglar Arsène Lupin, who both debuted in 1905. Another popular writer to benefit from the public interest in crime and imprisonment was Richard Marsh, the pseudonym of Bernard Heldmann (1857–1915), now mainly remembered for his occult thriller *The Beetle* (1897), a one-time rival of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, of the same year. Although the bulk of Marsh’s literary production must be classified as popular romance, crime is almost invariably a part of this body of work, providing most of the action and creating a degree of suspense as to the successful outcome of the love interest and the happy ending typical of the genre. As an up-to-date writer aware of topical issues, Marsh knew that crime sold, and his fiction is a good indicator of the spectrum of crime on offer at the turn of the century, covering detection, anarchist plotting, financial crime, burglary, murder, theft, and identity fraud.

During the course of his career, Marsh produced a substantial amount of fiction set either wholly or partly in prison. Imprisonment plays an important part in many of his novels—including *The Crime and the Criminal* (1897), *The Death Whistle* (1903), *In the Service of Love* (1906), *Justice—Suspended* (1913), and *His Love or His Life* (1915)—and is also a key element in some of his best short horror fiction, including such supernatural prison stories as “The Strange Occurrences in Canterstone Jail” (1890, published in book form in 1901), “The Mask” (1892, published in book form in 1900), and “The Photographs” (1900). In this account, I will focus on a further short prison story by Marsh, “For Debt” (1902). This story is something of an anomaly in Marsh’s prison fiction and, indeed, in his work in general. Whereas Marsh’s prison fiction is generally either melodramatic or supernatural, “For Debt” is realistic, journalistic, investigative, and, indeed, not obviously fictional at all. However, the story is of interest because of the way it straddles the categories of fiction, investigative journalism, and prison autobiography. Thus, it can be

examined with respect to the readership and entertainment value of all these categories of writing at the turn of the century.

"For Debt" takes as its starting point a striking judicial inconsistency. Imprisonment for debt had theoretically, although not in practice, been abolished in 1869; after that date, debtors who failed to settle as instructed by the judicial system were instead sentenced for contempt of court, a practice that continued in Britain into the 1960s, although by 1877, only 3 percent of prisoners were debtors (McConville, "Local" 309–10). This is the case with the anonymous protagonist of Marsh's story, "a poor devil of an author" (265), who finds himself in debt. For him, as for his fellow debtors, it is emphasized, "circumstances have been too strong" (263, 264, 281). This mantra is repeated time after time to elicit reader sympathy, while no account is given of the reasons for the author's indebtedness. Instead, the focus is on his feelings: on the pathetic parting from the near-hysterical young wife left behind with no money, the injustice of imprisonment for debt, and the sufferings of a prisoner of gentle breeding on coming into contact with prison food and bedding. By implication, the debt itself does not matter: the system that sends a debtor to jail is guilty of a greater offense.

"For Debt" is the most detailed and realistic of Marsh's prison stories. In the careful attention it pays to the routine of prison life, it closely resembles the work of the many prison autobiographers of the era and, like it, is geared toward eliciting reader sympathy. Although debtors were allowed many privileges unavailable to convicts, the protagonist of the story still finds his prison experience difficult. In this, his account compares well with those of convicts of high social origin, who also found the prison regime, designed to deter lower-class inmates, hard to bear. The story describes the claustrophobic experience of the destitute debtor, led into the prison "through a wicket in the huge doors" (264) "under a lofty arch" (265), and locked up in "cells which apparently are beneath the level of the ground," where the "door is banged on you" (266) and the "only thing you can see through the window are iron bars" (267). The graphic architectural detail of the writing is physically overpowering, conveying a sense of stifling incarceration and immediate dehumanization of the prisoner, which the reader can share and sympathize with. In this, "For Debt," like the prison autobiography on which it models itself, resembles investigative journalism in allowing the respectable reader to visit places he or she would never normally go to from the comfort of the home.

This pleasurable voyeurism is heightened once the protagonist describes the living conditions inside the prison. The warders speak in exclamation marks, issuing curt commands and informing the protagonist of the myriad things that are "against orders" (265). The food and bedding are described in great detail, again conveying to the reader a sense of physical shrinking from conditions to which he or she, alongside the middle-class protagonist of the story, is not accustomed. Despite his hunger, the protagonist finds the food

appalling but is comforted by his fellow prisoners that “you will be able to eat anything after you have been here a few days, even the tins” (275). A prisoner of gentle breeding is also subjected to the untold horrors of dirt and vermin: the tins are filthy, at first no water is provided for washing, and the “bedding [...] is alive [with vermin]. All night you lie in agony—literally” (270). Imprisonment becomes the physical manifestation of an individual’s loss of control over his life, diminishing his stature and confidence and dehumanizing him by breaking his will and lowering his expectations.

There can be no doubt that “For Debt” strongly sympathizes with the debtor, who, after all, benefits from many advantages compared to the experience of a convicted felon. The story provides a great deal of detail on the life stories of the protagonist’s fellow debtors, closely resembling investigative journalism. It queries the practice of imprisonment for debt, supposedly extinct, as in the case of a character imprisoned for being “too poor to pay his poor rates” (273). In a crushing comment on imprisonment for debt, the story concludes that a “small calculation discloses the fact that a little over ten pounds would set all eight [debtors] free” (276). Furthermore, the system hinders prisoners from working and, thus, earning the money with which to pay their debts. Although the protagonist is eventually granted the permission to work to complete his commissions in time, he is also aware “from experience that [he] cannot do good work upon an empty stomach” (275). Prison, in this way, becomes “an excellent school for the inculcation and encouragement of the Noble Art of Loafing” (279–80), instead of reforming the prisoner.

This sympathy for the imprisoned debtor is strengthened by the most distinctive feature in the story: its unusual narrative technique. Whereas most prison memoirs are written in the first-person singular and in the past tense, “For Debt” is consistently expressed in the second person and the present tense. The protagonist remains anonymous throughout, his experiences related in a narrative that blurs his identity and the time frame of his experience. This striking deployment of *you* throughout the story engages the reader by directly putting him or her in the place of the middle-class debtor. “You,” Marsh appears to imply, could find that “circumstances have been too strong”; “you” could go to prison; “you” could find yourself in the same situation as the anonymous man in the story. By further deploying the present tense, a device used by Charles Dickens, Marsh adds an immediacy to the narrative: The judicial inconsistency of imprisonment for debt is a reality taking place all the time, while you, the reader, are reading this story now, at this present time. By using this rather unusual device, Marsh’s message achieves a disconcerting universality, and by making his protagonist a likeable middle-class person, the author forces the audience to identify with him.

“For Debt” is the clearest condemnation of imprisonment that Marsh produced in the course of his career, and its publication history further adds

to its interest. In Marsh's 1906 collection *Under One Flag*, "For Debt" is hidden toward the end of this volume of fourteen rather diverse, light stories, mostly comic fiction and sketches of provincial or lower-middle-class life. From such a position in the collection, it could be argued that the author is either aware that the story fails to fit the volume, does not think much of it, or wishes not to draw attention to it. However, such a conclusion must be altered on consideration of the original magazine publication of the story. On its original publication in the fifteenth volume of the *Windsor Magazine* in January 1902, "For Debt" occupied the prominent position of the second article in a monthly issue that contained thirteen features, including serial adventure fiction by Hall Caine, a story with a child protagonist by E. Nesbit, a comic story by Richard Marsh, a feature on Egyptian art, a factual article on the working of the customs service, and advice on physical exercise. At 6 pence, the *Windsor Magazine* (Ward, Lock, and Bowden's answer to the *Strand*) sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies each month, making its stories available to a large audience. Conservative and royalist in tone (hence its name), the magazine aimed to offer healthy reading to all members of the lower-middle-class family, who would have appreciated its lavish illustrations. "It is to the home that the WINDSOR MAGAZINE desires specially to appeal," the preface to the first issue declared:

There is no moral necessity for a home magazine to be tedious, to regale the wife with solemn precepts when she wants to be cheered, and the husband with domestic little tales which never touch the strong currents of life [...] the chief purpose of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE is to illuminate the hearth with genial philosophy, to widen its outlook, to give it a reasonable attitude of inquiry towards the problems of the time, to make it crackle with the good humour which is born of true tolerance, and puts to flight the exaggerated self-consciousness of aggressive virtue. (2; emphasis in original)

Given that, in the course of his career, Marsh, the author of more than two hundred short stories, only contributed a handful of features to the *Windsor Magazine*, it is striking that two of these stories should appear in the same issue of the magazine. Interestingly, although the light and comic "My Aunt's Excursion," also published in the January 1902 issue of the *Windsor Magazine*, is signed as the work of Marsh, "For Debt" is anonymous. No indication is given of its authorship, and the two stories by Marsh are even illustrated by different artists, T. Walter Wilson ("For Debt") and Will Owen ("My Aunt's Excursion"). A possible explanation lies, of course, with the inclusion of another Marsh story in the same issue, anonymity producing the semblance of greater variety and diminishing the possibility of reader dissatisfaction with the fare presented. However, it is more likely that the anonymity of the story can be explained through its subject matter. Because of its unusual narrative technique, it is not easy to determine how to read "For Debt," and its anonymity shapes the reading of the story. The story could be read as fiction, as Marsh clearly intended in *Under One Flag* by placing it side-by-side with

other fiction; under these conditions, he was happy to affix his name to the story. The anonymity of the story in the *Windsor Magazine*, however, suggests that it should be read not as fiction but as autobiography, or possibly investigative journalism, and that its author would not wish to associate his name with the events described because of their personal application. This was a typical device with autobiographical accounts of imprisonment, whether in volume or short-story format.

The *Windsor Magazine*, then, offers “For Debt” to its readers as a sample of fashionable prison autobiography. Indeed, while most monthly issues of the magazine featured some social commentary appealing to its lower-middle-class, socially conservative readership, such as drunkenness and the deficiencies of the urban water supply in volume 15, no such social cause can be found in the January issue, with the exception of “For Debt.” Questions of prison reform are by no means a frequent topic in the *Windsor Magazine*, but the representation of the young, struggling, married author in the story could arguably appeal to a class of readers with social aspirations and financial difficulties of their own. Indeed, the protagonist’s offense, being a materialistic one, may have guaranteed his acceptability to the readers of the magazine, where an act of violence might have been found offensive and unsuited to a family audience.

Thus, it is possible that the responsibility for the anonymity of “For Debt” rests with the editorial board of the *Windsor Magazine*. However, it is also possible that Marsh himself was initially loath to sign the story. Born Richard Bernard Heldmann in 1857, he had begun a successful literary career under the name Bernard Heldmann in 1880. By 1882, he was coediting the *Union Jack*, a rival of the *Boy’s Own Paper*, with G. A. Henty, the leading boys’ author of the time, and producing apparently popular school and adventure stories for the magazine at a steady pace. In 1883, however, Heldmann and Henty unaccountably parted company, and Heldmann’s literary career came to an abrupt end. Nothing was heard of him until 1888, when, having adopted his maternal patronymic, he reappeared as Richard Marsh, a prolific producer of up-to-date crime, horror, and romantic fiction for a decidedly adult audience. Marsh was only specifically identified as Heldmann by his grandson Robert Aickman, himself an author of horror fiction, in his autobiography *The Attempted Rescue* (1966).² The two authors’ shared identity is confirmed by the presence of some of Heldmann’s short fiction in the short-story collection *A Drama of the Telephone* (1911), thus securely identifying Marsh with Heldmann.³

The long gap in the author’s career, his change of name, and his apparent reluctance to be identified as Heldmann, as well as his radical change of subject matter from religious juvenile fiction to slightly risqué crime, horror, and romantic fiction, raise the possibility that the change of identity may have been a necessary step to protect him from the law. In his articles on Marsh, Richard Dalby suggests that Heldmann may have spent time in prison after his argument with Henty and may subsequently have adopted the pen name

to protect his identity; however, no evidence has been produced in favor of such a theory, although Aickman writes about his grandfather's "slapdash way" (14) and "fast, foreign, and flashy [. . .] insouciance" with money (17). Financial frivolity certainly did run in the Heldmann family: Marsh's German father, Joseph Heldmann, had figured very unfavorably in large-scale bankruptcy proceedings in 1857–58, shortly after the birth of Marsh, having swindled his employers, who also happened to be his wife's relatives, to maintain a luxurious lifestyle ("Joseph Heldmann"). Marsh thus had firsthand family experience of financial trouble and debt, and if he had indeed experienced imprisonment for debt himself, his reluctance to sign "For Debt" becomes understandable. The story occupied a prominent position in the *Windsor Magazine*, and the leap from sympathizing with its protagonist, a struggling young author, to identifying him with the writer of the story, may have appeared dangerous to Marsh. The resulting anonymity of the story, however, adds to its appeal and effect on the reader, blurring the different genres available to a writer of prison narrative, highlighting the entertainment value of prison writing in an era usually associated with detective fiction, and subtly criticizing the administration of justice in Britain.

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NOTES

1. These memoirs included works by present and former staff members of prisons (Du Cane; Griffiths; Anderson; Pitkin; Ruggles-Brise; Jervis), former prisoners writing openly about their experiences (Davitt; Lee), pseudonymous memoirs by former prisoners (One Who Has Endured It; Ticket-of-Leave Man; Sykes; No. 7), and journalists (Scougal).

2. On Heldmann's transformation into Marsh, apparently undetected by his contemporaries, see Aickman 11, Richard Dalby's three accounts, and Taylor.

3. "In the Lion's Jaws," "A Memorable Night," and "A Fortune at a Find," published in the third volume of the *Union Jack*, were later republished in Marsh, *Drama*.

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