**‘Powerful beyond all question’ (Forster 132): Catherine Crowe’s Novels of the 1840s**

‘[O]nce as famous as Dickens or Thackeray’ (Wilson v). This is how Colin Wilson describes the author Catherine Crowe (1790-1872). Crowe is one of our lost women writers – once fêted, well-known and well-regarded, her pioneering work has largely faded into obscurity. The text that is best known is her anthology of ‘real’ ghost stories, *The Night Side of Nature: or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (1848), and it is this text that features most prominently in scholarly discussions of Crowe’s work. The preface to the Cambridge University Press reprint has this to say about the volume:

This lively collection of ghostly sketches and anecdotes was a Victorian best-seller and Crowe’s most popular work. Sixteen editions appeared in six years and it was translated into several European languages….Crowe’s vivid tales, written with great energy and imagination are classic examples of nineteenth-century spiritualist writing and strongly influenced other authors (*Night Side of Nature*).

*The Night Side of Nature* was the result of a project Crowe initiated with the intention of gathering as many reports of supernatural experiences as possible. Her goal was to provide evidence about the truth of paranormal phenomena and induce the scientific community to take it seriously. Crowe compiled her book from letters she received; first, second and third-hand accounts; newspaper articles; local folklore myths and stories and legends. The result is rather a strange amalgamation of anecdotal and often disconnected snippets about ghosts, people’s anomalous experiences of the supernatural or the unexplained. Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite the success of the book, Crowe was roundly derided by critics including Charles Dickens who wrote ‘there is the common fault of seeking to prove too much....She stands by her weakest ghost at least as manfully as her strongest’ (Barnard 202). Dickens was not alone in his condemnation of Crowe’s text, but Wilson asserts that, ‘Mrs Crowe was a lady of considerable celebrity and she was not to be silenced by ridicule; it only put her on her mettle. She was deeply convinced that the correct attitude towards the unknown was an open minded willingness to investigate’ (Wilson viii). Published nearly fifty years before the Society for Psychical Research’s 1895 ‘Census of Hallucinations,’ *The Night Side of Nature* also pre-dated the phenomenon that Spiritualism was to become. That Crowe’s work on the supernatural was influential is not in doubt, however this chapter examines another aspect of her writing: her novels, arguing that they too display the ‘open mindedness’ Wilson notes, and are pioneering in relation to women’s writing in the 1840s.

Crowe wrote five novels spanning the 1840s and 1850s. The focus of this chapter is on the first three novels: *Susan Hopley: or the Adventures of a Maid Servant* (1841), *Men and Women: or Manorial Rights* (1843) and *The Story of Lilly Dawson* (1847). Generically these books span the line between the Newgate novels of the 1840s and the sensation novels of the 1860s; including elements of crime, sensation and scandal. Lucy Sussex claims that the distinction of ‘most precursive’ writer of crime fiction in the 1840s belongs to Catherine Crowe’ (*Francis Trollope* 43), and it is worth noting that *Susan Hopley* was published four months before Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’. Mariaconcetta Costantini argues that ‘Crowe’s works confirm the fertility of her experimentation with genre’ (Costantini 35) and certainly much of her writing amalgamates different styles: from the Gothic to realism for example. They are great fun to read. Murders, adultery, false imprisonment, mistaken identities, kidnap, theft, rogues, vagabonds and ‘fallen’ women populate the pages. Cross-class love affairs and all manner of sensational scandals abound in Crowe’s novels. Often over-complicated, there are sub-plots, a host of characters, coincidences and many improbabilities. A review of *Susan Hopley* in *The Athenaeum* (whose author is unaware of Crowe’s gender) has this to say:

To the frequenter of the circulating library, this book…will be a welcome one. Crowded scenes and bustling actors, and a rapid succession of incidents, - whose movement is not restrained by any calculations on the part of the author as to their probability – keep up that sort of easy excitement which the confirmed novel-reader so much loves. There is a dashing disregard of the old consecrated unities, highly favourable to the author’s *go-ahead-ism*, as the Americans call it: - and in their place, he [sic] has set up a *quasi* unity of his own….It is wonderful with what supreme and unhesitating ease, disregarding all obstacles, moral and natural, he ties together the threads of his story (*Our Library Table* 93).

Although the reviewer is gently critical, he is correct in that *Susan Hopley* was a great success. Crowe’s novels become more sophisticated as the decade progresses, but they all have the ‘easy excitement’ and variety of incidents and characters mentioned here. As she wrote to the publisher William Blackwood about her second novel *Men and Women* ‘I think it calculated for popularity’ (Crowe 1843), and this ‘calculation’ extended to all her novels. The mixture of scandalous behaviour, Gothic darkness, sexual recklessness, realistic characterisations and plots brimming with incidents, red-herrings and shocks of all sorts ensured that, as the *Blackburn Standard* reported, in 1845 Crowe was ‘[a]mong the female novelists and story writers, [who are] we believe the most popular, and of course the best paid’ (*Rewards of Authorship* 4).

In line with many female authors, (particularly perhaps those writing later in the century), Crowe wanted to make money. Crowe wrote to her old friend Robert Chambers, editor of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, (where she published much of her work), stating that: ‘when once you accept an article of mine, you may do anything on earth you please with it. There are few people living who care so little on this subject as I do – I never wrote but with the view of profit, and have a laudable indifference to literary fame’ (Crowe 1841). Crowe is of course being somewhat disingenuous, but this is a view that she repeats in another letter to Chambers:

you may rely on it that I shall never interfere with any alterations you have thought proper to make whether I approve of them or not. In writing for you, as I said before, one works for money, and not for fame; and if you purchase my wares I think you have a right to do what you please with them – which, per parenthese, I think a very amicable quality in a contributory, and one that is certainly not universal (Crowe 1841).

Crowe is making this into something of a virtue. However, her intention was not entirely unmercenary and if her aim was to make money from her writing then as expansive an audience base as possible was necessary. Crowe wanted her books to be eminently readable and it seems she succeeded as John Forster somewhat reluctantly wrote about *Susan Hopley*, ‘[w]hen we had read the first twenty pages, the book was not again laid down’ (Forster 132). Crowe herself believed she had achieved her goal and wrote to Robert Chambers saying that her talent:

is story telling, drawing pictures of Human life, and so forth. That I have succeeded in doing this in my novel seems clear – it is that that is the charm of it – which makes young ladies refuse to lay it down to dress for a ball, and which makes the great men in London sit up all night to read it, and say they ‘can’t attend to the Eastern Question till they have finished Susan Hopley’ (Crowe 1841).

Crowe here is obviously speaking about a middle class readership, however her tales were widely read and she wanted to sell as many books as possible. In fact she published her last novel; *Linny Lockwood* (1854) in only two volumes, rather than the more usual three, as part of a ‘cheap series’ as she wrote she believed it was a book ‘of a kind that people generally read but once’ (Sergeant 1898).

Crowe’s first three novels are all works of crime fiction and tend towards the sensational. The narrative trajectory of all three begins with a murder. In *Susan Hopley* it is the brutal killing of Susan’s master Mr Wentworth that initiates the action. Susan’s brother Andrew appears to have fled the scene and in his absence is accused of the murder. Before she hears anything about the incident Susan has a prophetic dream:

I lifted my head and saw my brother Andrew sitting on the opposite side of the fire in his grave clothes, and with his two dead eyes staring at me with a shocking look of fear and horror…I tried to rouse myself and shake off my sleep…but I could not; and when I turned my eyes again on the chair where Andrew had been sitting, instead of him I saw my master there with a large gash in his throat, and his eyes steadfastly fixed on me (*Susan Hopley* 19).

This smacks of the Gothic and although it is the only supernatural occurrence in the novel, it is significant in that it chimes with Crowe’s firm belief in the after-life. Susan remains certain of her brother’s innocence:

For my heart still told me he was not guilty; and that if he were alive, he would surely come forward and vindicate himself; and if he were dead, his body would yet be found, and his wounds speak for him. Would it not be worth while to live through all the wretchedness the scorn of the world could inflict on me, to hail that day at last? (*Susan Hopley* 31).

She sets out to clear Andrew’s name and turns detective. Susan has some extraordinary adventures including helping to save one of her mistresses from ruin and disgrace, her master from a murder charge after a dual and the daughters of another employer after they are robbed and abandoned in Transylvania. Surrounded by vice, crime, thefts and illicit sexual encounters, Susan keeps her head and comes through both triumphant and unscathed.

Lucy Sussex suggests that *Susan Hopley* ‘is most unusual – for the time – in that its story of crime and consequences is generally told through the experience of women’ (*Forgotten Voices* 58). In Crowe’s work it is usually the women who triumph. A contemporary review in *The Athenaeum* has this to say about *Susan Hopley*: ‘ruffians abound in his [sic] pages; but they, and their schemes, have no chance against Susan’ (*Our Library Table* 94). Susan is instrumental in detecting the true murderer and it is she who is the heroine of the book. Women are pivotal to Crowe’s work; she allows them independence and a voice, and her criticism of their lack of educational opportunities and position in the marriage market-place is clear. The character of Mabel in *Susan Hopley* is an interesting one in this respect. The villainous Walter Gaveston has murdered his fiancé’s father, Mr Wentworth and deliberately cast suspicion on Susan’s brother Andrew, declaring he has committed the crime and run off with the beautiful dairymaid Mabel. In fact, in order to get her out of the way, Gaveston has convinced Mabel to leave with the promise of a marriage to a nobleman and she knows nothing of the murder or the suspicions which follow her. Mabel is sent to France with a villain acting under the name of Colonel Jones. Her ambition for rank and fortune blind her to the real situation. Poor Mabel is tricked into a false marriage and she tells her story later:

For some months I believed myself the wife of the duke…but at length an accident disclosed the truth to me….I was utterly ignorant of the French language [and] believing myself to be the Duchess of Rochechouart, and anticipating the time when I should be introduced at court and into society, I thought it right to acquire the language of the people I was to live amongst. I therefore privately engaged a master and applied myself assiduously to the study….But this newly acquired talent was the accidental means of opening my eyes to my real situation (*Susan Hopley* 365).

As a lowly dairymaid Mabel received no proper education. Flattered because of her beauty she became ambitious and wanted to raise herself in the world and this made her vulnerable. However, her undeceiving is her own doing as she decides to educate herself. Mabel overhears a conversation which she says, ‘although I was not a sufficient adept in the language to understand thoroughly, undeceived me completely with respect to my own position’ (*Susan Hopley* 364). What the unfortunate Mabel finds out is that ‘I had been actually sold; and that it had been merely a contest between the young noblemen I was introduced to, which should have me; Colonel Jones standing out for the highest price’ (*Susan Hopley* 364). Mabel is however fond of the duke by now, and has very little choice but to stay with him. Her solution to her horrible position is unexpected: ‘I saw one means of improving my situation….I perceived that by repairing the deficiencies of my early education, I should not only render myself more agreeable to Rochechouart, but that I should be supplying myself with a resource during the life of solitude and abandonment that lay before me’ (*Susan Hopley* 365). Mabel decides to educate herself further and sees this as a way to save herself.

That Crowe feels strongly about women’s position in the 1840s is clear and there is a long aside in her third novel *The Story of Lilly Dawson* about how appalling women’s education is compared to men’s. Crowe takes several pages to discuss the state of women’s education and says:

Man having…settled to his own entire satisfaction the question of the weakness and inferiority of woman, and everything being done that training could do, to produce such results as confirmed his conclusion, it necessarily followed that she was unfit to cope with the world or resist the manifold dangers and temptations that surrounded her; and it was accordingly found necessary to hem her in by decorums and circumscribe her by conventionalities, which altogether precluded her from that self-education by experience which the more active life of man afforded him (*Lilly Dawson* 199).

Crowe sees women’s education (training) itself as producing the type of useless women expected by men in early Victorian society. Women, she believed, were *educated* into positions of inferiority and weakness. In *Susan Hopley*, Crowe uses the interesting and sympathetic character of Mabel to critique women’s powerless position in relation to men and at the same time to suggest one possible solution – empowerment through education. Mabel refuses to be passive. In a thrilling scene she describes how, after she sees the duke shot, she gallops after the killers on horseback and is instrumental in their capture. Crowe’s erstwhile biographer Geoffrey Larken comments that ‘[i]t is significant that scoundrels, felons, murderers, weaklings and wastrels abound in the pages of her five novels and that she seldom attempted to draw a satisfactory and reliable male character’ (Larken 81). Throughout her novels Crowe has strong heroines and weak or villainous men.

Larken contends that in Crowe’s work ‘masculinity is represented, with a few exceptions, by murderers, thieves, false impersonators, customs-dodgers, seducers and other unscrupulous rogues, scoundrels and crooks’ (Larken 101). In *Susan Hopley* the murderer is upper-class – the villainous Mr Gaveston, the man who ruined Mabel and cast suspicion onto Susan’s brother Andrew. Gaveston killed Mr Wentworth (and we find out Andrew too) for monetary gain. Gaveston has no excuse for his villainy and does not begin with natural disadvantages. Crowe tells us:

there could be no doubt that Mr. Gaveston was a very fine looking man….His features were regular and manly; he had a beautiful set of teeth, dark hair and eyes, a complexion bronzed into a very becoming hue by the sun of the South, and a figure that formed a perfect model of strength and agility. And, accordingly, there were few men who excelled so much in all manly exercises; whether he walked, rode or danced, the performance was perfect (*Susan Hopley* 11).

Gaveston however is a murderous scoundrel and his ‘manly’ physicality covers greed, selfishness and cowardice. This type of flashy masculinity often presents a superficial attractiveness which hides vice and villainy.

In Crowe’s second novel, *Men and Women* the aristocratic blackguard Sir John Eastlake feels certain of being able to seduce one of our heroines, Lucy Graham. We are told that he believes this to be:

[a]n enterprise that, if he gave his mind to it, he thought he could not fail to succeed in. And, indeed, it must be admitted that he had not a bad stock in trade to begin with. Besides his rank and his wealth, he was a man in the prime of life, with a very handsome person, great animal spirits and good humour (*Men and Women* 1: 91).

Sir John preys on his tenant’s daughters, indulging in what ‘he was pleased to call, “sporting on his own domain”’ (*Men and Women* 1: 223). He is aided and abetted in his seductions by his confidential valet, Vincent Groves. Groves organises the practicalities and covers up the consequences so that Sir John is not troubled by them:

It did not follow that innumerable evils did not succeed; rankling spirits, disappointed hopes, blasted prospects; sometimes broken hearts, and sometimes corruption, vice, infamy, despair and death. But these came not before his eyes, seldom reached his ears, and therefore they touched him not. The bitter tears mingled not with his food, not did the groans of anguish disturb his pillow. He eat and slept well; Groves was an invaluable fellow! (*Men and Women* 1: 81)

Sir John is a villain of the ilk of Walter Gaveston: handsome, entirely immoral, greedy and deeply selfish. Sir John is murdered as a direct consequence of his seductions. After all manner of complications, false accusations and red-herrings it is found out that it is Groves who has killed Sir John. Groves has discovered that one of the baronet’s ‘conquests’ was his own sister. Sir John, the aristocrat is murdered by his servant. However, it is Sir John who is seen as being more to blame and his crimes against lower-class and vulnerable women are the most condemned.

This however, was of course a problem in the 1840s. A long and critical review of *Men and Women*, in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* laments that the author should expend ‘his’ power on bad characters. The chief concern is with Crowe’s portrayal of the character of Sir John:

We had expected better things from the author of ‘Susan Hopley’ not perhaps that the work before us is much inferior to its predecessor in point of literary talent; the deficiency to which we allude is rather one of a moral kind. We do not believe that such a state of society as that represented in this tale could ever have existed in this country in modern times, or that such an individual as the baronet, who fills so prominent a place in its pages, would have been allowed to pursue his vicious and wicked career, supposing him even to have attempted it, which it is quite improbable that any one in his station would have done (*Gentleman’s Magazine* 1844).

There are several criticisms here. The first is about the ‘probability’ of Sir John’s behaviour. The critic doubts that in modern Britain it would have been countenanced, but perhaps more importantly, he doubts that a man of Sir John’s ‘station’ would have contemplated behaving in that way. This is of course a point about class and there is an assumption that a baronet would never behave in such a scandalous manner. Keith Hollingsworth suggests that in the 1840s one of the main causes for uneasiness was that crime novels used ‘criminality as a way an occasion to interrogate class structure and ideology’ (Hollingsworth 32) and this is certainly true in the strong critiques of class throughout Crowe’s novels. She ends the novel with a warning: ‘let those who do not scruple to employ their retainers and dependants in services that debase their minds and corrupt their morals, beware’ (*Men and Women* 3: 360). Sir John has abused his position, ‘ruined’ several local girls and debased his servant: all of which lead to his own downfall.

Crowe’s third novel, although still crime fiction, veers more towards sensation literature; a genre that was to become so popular later in the century. In *The Story of Lilly Dawson* Lilly’s family are murdered by pirates who kidnap her as an infant and she is kept as a slave/servant by the terrible Littenhaus family. Lilly eventually escapes and is restored to her rightful position by the end of the book. There are similar themes to her first two books in *Lilly Dawson.* Lilly is nearly married, much against her will, to the arch-villain Luke Littenhaus. However more by luck than design, she escapes him, uncovers a murder and helps to convict Luke who ends his days in an insane asylum. *Lilly Dawson* is quite a scandalous novel and perhaps not surprisingly it was condemned in some quarters. A long review of the novel entitled ‘Novel in Low Life’, in *The Literary Gazette* suggests that Crowe’s ‘chief merit will…be found in the exact descriptions of manners and feelings of the vile and lowly personages with whom she has peopled her page….[W]e are surprised how any female in the better walks of life could learn to represent them in so vivid and apparently accurate a style’ (*Literary Gazette* 188). Murder, vice, the under-classes and their lives are apparently no place for a lady-novelist in the 1840s. This consideration however never stopped Crowe and *Lilly Dawson* presents a narrative of smugglers, beggars, murderers, thieves and vagabonds that might have caused Jane Eyre (whose story was published at the same time) to raise a neat eyebrow. The reviewer comments on one of the (several) murders in the novel:

There is no time for reflection, or indulgence in grief; and the deed done, the world goes on with them much the same as before. We accordingly avoid that morbid dwelling upon the minutiae and balancings of conscience, - which, we fear, offer no beneficial lessons to mankind, - and have little more than the naked facts of throat-cuttings to lead us on through the series of villanies [sic], and their final retribution (*Literary Gazette* 188).

Crowe is more interested in producing a rollicking, populist narrative than any sort of in-depth, serious exploration of the consequences of vice and crime.

This concurs with one of the main criticisms of early Victorian crime fiction: that it introduced and familiarised gentle, middle class readers to criminals and their crimes. Crowe novels often portray quite shocking scenes of violence and vice and crimes of all sorts form the main body of the narratives. The reviewer of *Men and Women* in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* argues that the responsibility for not corrupting the morality of others lies with the author and critiques Crowe’s depiction of villains:

Why…would a writer…go out of his way to invent an improbable state of things, and attempt to describe characters who, bad as human nature may be, are certainly much worse than its average standard of evil? To display invention and power of writing at the expense of injuring the tone of mind of the reader, and deteriorating that fine moral sense, which in the case of the youth…it ought to be an especial object to persevere uncorrupted, is surely an exhibition of talent which an author should be cautious of risking (*Gentleman’s Magazine* 1844).

Vulnerable young people may be influenced through the power of Crowe’s writing, the structures of society itself may begin to be questioned and her readers’ ‘moral sense’ may be damaged.

The reviewer professes ‘fear’ for young people, but it seems there is a ‘risk’ for all who read Crowe’s work. In the *Encylopedia of British Writers:* Christine Krueger states that:

During the height of her success in the 1840s, Crowe was regarded as a writer for all classes. Many 19th-century readers could relate to her novels because they featured ordinary places and ordinary working people. Her sympathy for the pressures experienced by working-class women make Crowe one of the most popular writers of her time (Krueger 97-98).

Working class women were also reading her novels and Susan, Mabel, Lilly and, in fact, most of Crowe’s leading females are working-class heroines. One of the most striking aspects of these novels is that there is a marked lack of romance. While there may be romantic liaisons and various relationships are followed through misunderstandings and obstacles, these do not form the centre of any of the narratives. Susan loses her lover on her way to detect the murderer of Mr Wentworth and never marries. Mabel gives up on men and sex entirely and voluntarily ends her days as a boarder in a convent. Lilly also loses her lover for a time to the fascinating May Elliot, and although she gains him back, he is fallen from whatever pedestal he was balancing on and the union seems somewhat subdued. Lilly however is allowed a happy marriage which is something many other female characters in her novels are not.

Crowe had strong views on social equality and women’s rights and the very fact of her undoubted popularity and fame must have ensured that her voice was heard. She was an important figure in the literary circles of the time and Crowe knew Dickens and Thackeray, she was very good friends with Harriet Martineau, met Charlotte Brontë and took tea with George Eliot. Mary Elizabeth Braddon acted in the stage adaptation of *Susan Hopley* (Carnell) and Crowe scandalised Hans Christian Anderson at a party when she and a friend drank ether and he observed that they ‘laughed with open, dead eyes’ (*Silent Voices* 59). Crowe might have been a colourful character but she was not a footnote in the literary circles of the day: she was well known and her work was widely read. It is therefore surprising that in 2015 Stephen Knight claimed of *Susan Hopley* that‘the novel had no real influence’ (Knight 2015) and that Hollingsworth dismisses the novel as ‘minor fiction…ambitious but incompetent’ (Hollingsworth 182). In 1854 Crowe suffered a psychotic episode and had a well-publicised breakdown. She was subject to much ridicule and it is quite probable that this affected the way that her earlier work was perceived at the time and this prejudice may have permeated through into contemporary scholarly judgement. Certainly today her novels are not well-known and this makes a reassessment of her work difficult as there is so little scholarly work about her. However, if viewed in the context of 1840s women’s writing it becomes clear that Crowe’s work is pioneering in many ways. Near the end of the nineteenth Century Adeline Sergeant looked back at Crowe’s work, unusually arguing for its importance:

[Crowe] left a mark upon the age in which she lived, and she helped, in a quiet, undemonstrative fashion, to mould the women of England after higher ideals than had been possible in the early days of the century. Those who consider the development of women to be one of the distinguishing features of Queen Victoria's reign should not forget that they owe deep gratitude to writers like Mrs. Crowe, who upheld the standard of a woman's right to education and economic independence long before these subjects were discussed in newspapers and upon public platforms (Sergeant 1897).

Sergeant makes clear Crowe’s importance in the struggle for the ‘development of women’ and as we have seen, she was particularly interested in the plight of under-educated working-class women. This chapter argues that looking again at her novels will bear fruit, and a proper reassessment may well accord Crowe a prominent place in women’s writing of the 1840s.

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