

# Reclaiming Narrative Authority: Gendered Violence and Feminist Reauthorship in Sharon Pollock's *Saucy Jack*

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## Abstract

This article examines Sharon Pollock's *Saucy Jack* (1994) as a feminist intervention into the narrative structures that have sustained the cultural authority of Jack the Ripper mythology. Drawing on feminist historiography, particularly Judith Walkowitz's analysis of male violence as narrative structure and Hallie Rubenhold's reclamation of the murdered women's lived histories, the essay argues that Ripper narratives depend on three interlocking conventions: killer-centered focalization, the erasure of women's lives, and the aestheticization of death

as spectacle. Through close performance analysis, the article shows how Pollock dismantles these conventions by centering Kate, a music hall actress whose reenactments transform performance into refusal, reclamation, and reauthorship. By naming the women, foregrounding relationality, and denying the pleasures of reenacted violence, *Saucy Jack* transfers narrative authority from the killer to the performer. The play thus offers a feminist model of narrative reclamation grounded in embodiment, ethical witnessing, and resistance to misogynist spectacle.

## Introduction

*For over 130 years we have embraced the dusty parcel we were handed.  
We have rarely ventured to peer inside it or attempted to remove the thick  
wrapping that has kept us from knowing these women or their true histories.*

—Hallie Rubenhold, *The Five*

On any given night, just outside the Tower Hill tube station on Whitechapel Road, groups gather for one of the many Jack the Ripper tours. Multiple groups depart nightly, at least three conducted in English and just as many in other languages. At roughly twenty pounds per person, even on a slow evening, over a hundred tourists may be guided through the streets of Whitechapel where Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Liz Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly were murdered in the autumn of 1888—killed, in part, for want of the four pence needed to secure a night's lodging. Moving in tightly packed groups, the tours pause at each murder site while guides use handheld projectors to cast grainy images of mutilated bodies onto nearby walls and narrate the events of 1888 (Engelhart). The story they tell follows a familiar script, one that centers a shadowy killer, collapses the women into nameless types, and grants their lives meaning only insofar as they sustain the mystery of the murderer. For the price of admission, tourists step inside a narrative that has been told so often, and with such narrative authority, that it is easily mistaken for history itself. These nightly tours reproduce the same narrative logic that structures Ripper mythology more broadly: selective focalization on the killer or detective, silence around the women's lives, and the aestheticization of their deaths through violent spectacle. Together, these conventions produce what might be called *narrative impunity*: a cultural logic in which the perpetrator of gendered violence accrues notoriety, mystique, and even admiration, while the women he killed disappear into the background of the story itself.

There are numerous retellings of the Jack the Ripper myth, most of which center on the mystery of the killer's identity or the figure of

the man charged with solving the case. Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927) is the earliest film treatment of the Ripper case and many more would follow. *Murder by Decree* (1979) imagines a confrontation between Sherlock Holmes and the killer, folding the Ripper into an already mythologized detective narrative, while *A Study in Terror* (1965) similarly positions Holmes as the rational agent capable of containing the violence through deduction. Later adaptations sustain this emphasis: the Hughes Brothers' *From Hell* (2001), adapted from the graphic novel, foregrounds Inspector Abberline as the narrative anchor, even granting him a quasi-psychic authority that elevates the interpretive power of the investigator. Even the made-for-television film *Jack the Ripper* (1988), produced to mark the centennial of the murders, reinforces this structure: its narrative culminates in four alternate endings, each proposing a different suspect, inviting viewers to participate in the speculative game of identifying the killer. Across these retellings, the women remain marginal, their lives subordinated to the central puzzle of male violence. When individual victims are named, it is most often Mary Jane Kelly—the youngest—who is elevated, and even then she is frequently reconfigured as a romantic figure, imagined as a love interest for a male character (detective, suspect, or even the killer himself). Such gestures toward individuation do little to disrupt the underlying narrative logic; instead, they reinscribe it, and reabsorb the victim into a familiar trope that serves the emotional arc of the male protagonist. Other iterations push the mythology further into fantasy. Films such as *Time After Time* (1979) portray Jack as an almost supernatural figure who evades capture by traveling through time, transforming his elusiveness from a historical problem into a defining narrative feature that entrenches his centrality and perpetuates his impunity.

Cultural historian Charlotte Mallinson argues that Jack the Ripper's mythical status is not merely accompanied by the degradation of his victims but structurally depends upon it. Constructions of Jack as a "celebrated icon of sex crime and violence" rely on the simultaneous production of denigrated identities for the women he murdered, whose bodies are repeatedly framed as "old, ugly, drunken,

filthy, or sexually deviant” (2). This co-dependent logic ensures that narrative fascination accrues to Jack while the women are reduced to placeholders whose deaths require neither grief nor explanation. Mallinson’s intervention thus clarifies that Ripper mythology is sustained not only through fascination with male violence but through the systematic devaluation of female life.

Judith Walkowitz develops this insight further in her groundbreaking essay “Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence,” in which she argues that male violence in the Ripper case operates as a narrative structure as much as a physical act. The elevation of Jack the Ripper to a figure of enduring fascination required a systematic erasure of the women he murdered; only by stripping them of identity could the killer be elevated to legendary status. As the field of Ripperology developed, driven overwhelmingly by male voices, the murdered women were collapsed into a single reductive category: the prostitute. This framing rendered them narrative afterthoughts, interchangeable bodies through which the mystery of the killer could be sustained. Even though London police did not officially identify the women as prostitutes and many friends and neighbors at the inquests explicitly refused that designation (Walkowitz 558), Ripper narratives have consistently represented them as such. The result is a narrative tradition that privileges male agency, silences women’s histories, and transforms violence into spectacle, a tradition whose influence extends far beyond the Victorian moment.

This article proceeds in three movements. I begin by tracing how Ripper narratives have relied on the erasure of the women’s identities in order to sustain the killer’s cultural authority. I then turn to Sharon Pollock’s play *Saucy Jack* (1994) to show how she disrupts that narrative logic through Kate’s embodied performances of the five murders, which move from compliance to resistance across the play’s first act. Finally, I consider how Pollock’s reconfiguration of narrative agency in the play’s second act challenges the broader cultural afterlife of the Ripper narrative and its enduring consequences for how gendered violence is understood and remembered.

## Centering the Women of Whitechapel

This section turns from the mythology of Jack the Ripper to the work of recovering the lives of the women he killed. In *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (2019), Hallie Rubenhold deliberately shifts attention away from the violent spectacle of the Ripper murders and towards the lived histories of the women he killed. For Rubenhold, reclaiming these women's histories requires dismantling the inherited narratives of Ripperology—the “dusty parcel we were handed”—and stripping away the “thick wrapping” that has mediated, and ultimately obscured, access to their lives (12). Excavating archival traces of their lives rather than rehearsing the details of their deaths, she presents them as daughters, wives, and mothers who arrived on the streets through a range of misfortunes—poverty, abandonment, illness, and unstable relationships—rather than through a shared identity as sex workers. She observes that the belief that Jack the Ripper killed prostitutes is the one so-called “fact” on which most accounts agree, and yet “it does not bear scrutiny” (289). She argues that there is no definitive evidence that any of the women were engaged in prostitution; rather, she shows that four of the five were unhoused and dependent on doss-houses for shelter, linking their presence on the streets, and thus their vulnerability to violence, directly to economic precarity and the lack of money for a night's lodging. In her analysis, the story of Jack the Ripper shifts from a problem of criminal identity to a case study in how structural inequality shapes vulnerability, exposure to violence, and institutional response.

The response to Rubenhold's intervention was swift and revealing. As criminologist Paul Bleakley notes, her argument “puts a dramatic new spin on our understanding of the Ripper murders” and challenges more than a century of entrenched assumptions within Ripperology (660). Yet, rather than prompting sustained reassessment, *The Five* met with notable resistance. Commentators repeatedly defended the classification of the victims as prostitutes, even where evidence was limited or absent. Some conceded that the women may not have been professional sex workers but maintained that they likely engaged in

occasional survival sex, effectively preserving the designation. What is striking is not simply disagreement, but the insistence on retaining this label, even in attenuated form. As Bleakley suggests, this resistance reveals how deeply Ripperology depends on a narrative framework that centers the killer while rendering the women legible primarily through a stigmatizing category. Rubenhold herself argues that this persistence is partly economic: it “supports an industry that has grown, in part, out of this mythology” (13). Sustained through books, tours, films, and theatrical retellings, that industry reproduces familiar conventions—privileging the killer as the primary narrative focus while reducing the women to interchangeable figures whose deaths are replayed as spectacle. Most striking, however, is Rubenhold’s refusal to engage the question of the killer’s identity at all. Each woman’s story ends before her murder, withholding the act of violence that traditionally anchors the narrative and displacing attention away from the killer entirely. By contrast, she rejects both the prostitute designation and the impulse to mythologize the murderer, redirecting focus toward the material conditions that shaped these women’s lives. In doing so, she reframes the murders not as a puzzle of criminal detection but as a case study in how social and economic precarity structures vulnerability to violence and erasure from historical memory. As Deborah Cameron argues, the “kitsch nostalgia spectacle” of traditional Ripper narratives does not merely aestheticize misogynist violence but, in a crucial sense, repeats it, erected “on the real deaths of real women whose real names we know,” even as their voices, relationships, and desires are systematically silenced (153).

Sharon Pollock’s *Saucy Jack* (1994), written two decades before *The Five*, anticipates the kind of narrative reclamation Rubenhold undertakes. Pollock, one of Canada’s most incisive documentary dramatists, used theatre to expose the ideological structures embedded in historical and political events. Her work consistently centers voices marginalized by official historical accounts, inviting audiences to reconsider the narrative frameworks through which those histories have been constructed. As Pollock was writing *Saucy Jack*, Canadian newspapers were reporting on the disappearances and murders of

Indigenous women and sex workers across the prairies and along the so-called Highway of Tears. Like the Ripper's victims, these women were neglected by the state and erased from public concern, their deaths treated as inevitable rather than preventable. As Sherrill Grace observes, *Saucy Jack* is therefore not only a critique of Victorian history but also "about Canadian indifference to the murder of vulnerable women" (310). Pollock recognizes that the Ripper narrative has not merely reflected but actively shaped cultural responses to gendered violence, teaching audiences how to read—and misread—women's lives through conventions that privilege the killer's perspective while minimizing the victims' humanity.

It is no surprise, then, that *Saucy Jack* emerges as a powerful counternarrative, resisting the narrative machinery that has long centered the killer rather than the women he destroyed. In her introduction to the play, Pollock makes clear that she is uninterested in solving the mystery of the murders: "The women are killed because they can be killed with relative or complete impunity. It's done because it can be done" (5). Her intervention is not epistemological—she does not seek to resolve the question of the killer's identity—but narratological. Through staging, performance, and design, she reconfigures the conditions of perception themselves by shifting narrative attention away from the enigmatic figure of the killer and toward the social structures that render the women vulnerable in the first place.

### **Embodying the Women of Whitechapel**

This section argues that *Saucy Jack* reimagines the women of Whitechapel through performance, shifting them from objects of narrative control to embodied agents of their own stories. *Saucy Jack* opens with Jem, a figure loosely based on James Kenneth Stephen, who employs Kate, a music hall actress, to assist with a private reenactment of the Whitechapel murders. In possession of bloodied knives he believes may be connected to Jack the Ripper, Jem is obsessed with uncovering the killer's identity, worried that he or Prince Albert may have killed the women in an altered state. He hires Kate to reenact the murders in the hope that the performance will produce a confession, or

recognition of guilt. While Jem remains fixated on the question of authorship—*who did it*—the play increasingly shifts focus toward Kate, whose performances transform her from a tool of another man's script into an emerging narrative agent.

Jem equates Kate, the actress he has hired, with the prostitutes he assumes the Ripper's victims to be and expects her to follow the script he has prepared for her. In 1888, actresses were often associated with prostitution, but Pollock's choice to write the character of Kate as a music hall performer adds further complexity. Music hall actresses typically portrayed the poorest and most marginalized Victorian women, those who had suffered abuse or lived outside social norms: unmarried, unhoused, or otherwise disenfranchised. As Sam Beale observes, many had grown up in poverty themselves and "were trusted by audiences who recognized their comic interpretations of working-class experience as rooted in credible documentary observation" (188). Their characters resonated deeply with working-class female audience members and these performances might be the only time a poor woman's experiences were played center stage. As skilled improvisers and staunch defenders of their class, music hall actresses knew that "East End audiences would not tolerate patronizing or mocking depictions of working-class characters" (188) and, as Pollock will soon show us, neither will Kate.

Jem immediately asserts control through a burst of misogynistic rage, berating Kate as "beneath contempt" and admitting he would like to "slit [her] throat" (Pollock 20). Whether he despises her for being an actress or simply for being a woman, the effect is the same: Kate is positioned as disposable, a body he can use to further his own fractured narrative about Eddy and the murders. His volatility makes the threat of violence palpable, yet when Eddy enters, Kate recalibrates. Seeing an opportunity to perform for a prince, she steadies herself, draws on her professional instincts, and prepares to play the role Jem has scripted for her. Slipping into the costume of Mary Ann "Polly" Nichols, she takes her place not as a passive victim but as a performer who will soon complicate the story she has been hired to enact. Kate's first reenactment establishes the play's central tension



between spectacle and resistance: she appears to comply with Jem's script even as she quietly destabilizes it from within.

KATE: I'll soon get me doss money, see what a jolly bonnet I've got now? Two pence a poke and four pence a bed. I've earned money for a doss bed three times over today and spent it all on drink! (*She laughs, then sings.*)

I pray you Lord, for Jesus' sake,  
Give me this day a little cake. (24-25)

Kate initially performs the expected script: the cheerful prostitute plying her trade with exaggerated flair and humor. It is the role she has been hired to play, and she inhabits it with professional precision. Yet, as a trained music hall performer, Kate draws on that tradition to complicate her portrayal of Mary Ann Nichols. The tone may be jaunty, but Kate recognizes that Nichols, like many women on the streets, was hungry and vulnerable, her survival dependent on securing food and shelter. As she performs "Polly," Kate layers references to poverty, abandonment, and endurance into the caricature Jem expects, inviting a more attentive audience to read the exaggerated theatricality in tension with flashes of lived suffering.

This doubleness is evident in her line to the prince: "I was a good girl once, but me old man ran off with me best friend [...]. Oh, he come back. They always come back. I wish to God he'd stayed away" (25). While the line can register as comic banter within the music hall idiom, it also gestures toward a history of marital instability and male neglect. As Rubenhold has argued, the persistent identification of the murdered women as prostitutes obscures the structural conditions that shaped their lives: poverty, homelessness, and violent or unstable relationships with men. By invoking an absent or abusive husband rather than sexual deviance, Kate redirects attention away from moralized assumptions about sex work and toward the gendered vulnerabilities Rubenhold insists put these women in danger. In allowing "Polly" to shift from theatrical charm to momentary vulnerability, Kate enacts the kind of narrative reclamation Rubenhold calls for, restoring

complexity and causality to a life that Ripper narratives have flattened into type.

When Kate bends before Jem, hiking her skirt in a grotesque parody of seduction, he seizes her, spins her around, and throws her to the floor. Lifting the bloody knife, he traces Nichols's autopsy wounds across her body while reciting the coroner's report, ritualizing each cut and allowing official language to authorize his violence. Pollock places the full weight of remembrance on Kate's body, transforming her into a living archive of Mary Ann Nichols's trauma. As Jem maps Nichols's wounds onto her flesh, Kate becomes both surrogate and survivor, collapsing the distance between historical violence and its present reenactment. In doing so, Pollock exposes not only the allure of narratives built on male violence but also the habits of spectatorship that encourage such stories to be consumed with eroticized fascination.

When the reenactment of Mary Ann Nichols's murder fails to move Eddy, Jem cues Kate to perform the killing of Annie Chapman. If the Nichols 'performance' exposes how theatrical convention normalizes violence by aestheticizing and authorizing it, the reenactment of Chapman marks a decisive shift from caricature to material life and shows us Kate's first overt challenge to the narrative logic of traditional Ripper mythology. Kate's performance of Chapman marks a refusal of the role Jem expects. The jolly prostitute gives way to a working-class woman shaped by exhaustion, scarcity, and persistence: "There's never enough and I'm sick and I'm tired, but I can't give up, I've got to go on..." (28). Her voice foregrounds labor and survival and Pollock uses this brief portrait to expose the economic brutality that shaped Chapman's daily existence. Kate's turn from caricature to material reality directly challenges Ripperology's narrative, which depends on stripping the murdered women of their specificity and reducing them to generalized types. By refusing the stereotype, Kate renders Annie Chapman legible as a historically specific woman shaped by economic precarity and gendered vulnerability rather than as a narrative device within the killer's story.

Jem however remains indifferent to how Chapman lived; he delights only in her corpse. After he mimes slitting her throat, he once again uses his knife to trace an autopsy report onto Kate's body, reenacting the dismemberment the Ripper industry has long fetishized. This time, however, Kate refuses to allow the moment to settle into spectacle. Interrupting the violent arousal that builds as Jem narrates Chapman's mutilation, Kate gives voice to Chapman's corpse itself, wondering who took her few belongings: "me rings... a piece of muslin... a coupla coins," (29) the small tokens that made up Chapman's life, meaningless to the killer but precious to her. Kate's intervention shifts the scene's center of gravity: what Jem treats as forensic evidence, Kate insists on being recognized as the residue of a woman's life. Yet even as she redirects the narrative toward recognition and empathy, Jem and Eddy remain fixated on one another and on the question of guilt; they care only about who the killer is, not who he killed. Their indifference allows Pollock to contrast two modes of focalization: a feminist performance that insists on recognition and empathy, and the dominant Ripper narrative, in which attention remains fixed on the murderer while the humanity of the women he killed is eclipsed.

With the third reenactment, Pollock shifts the emphasis from individual biography to the conditions under which violence becomes routine, public, and largely unremarkable. Liz Stride was murdered just outside the International Working Men's Club, while revolutionary songs were being sung inside. Jem cites witness testimony describing a brief struggle and a muted scream (33), cueing Kate to perform the scene as another scripted victimization. This time resistance turns to refusal. Rather than screaming on command, Kate channels a collective, working-class voice, launching into a labor anthem, "The Red Flag," that indicts the ruling class: "if blood be the price of all your wealth / good God we have paid in full" (33). The shift replaces individualized suffering with structural critique, transforming Stride's death into an accusation against the social conditions that render gender and class-based violence ordinary. Kate sings not only for Stride but for the working men and women whose lives have

been ground down by industrial capitalism and patriarchal violence. Kate actively challenges the power structures that produced and sustained Liz Stride's precarity, calling out not only the Ripper's violence but the broader social order that depends on such violence to maintain its hierarchies. Kate's rebellious performance enrages Jem, who lunges at her with his knife raised. Reading the danger instantly, she pivots, dropping her accusatory tone and slipping into the character he expects. The shift is pure survival: only by returning to the script that renders women compliant and voiceless can she deflect Jem's threat of violence: "I'm a cheerful sort, me name's Long Liz and I don't look nothin' like that picture they'll print a me" (34). But as soon as Jem lowers his knife, Kate opens her arms, returns to the workers' anthem, and begins to dance. This provokes Jem's violent escalation: abandoning theatrical mediation altogether, he seizes Kate and chokes her with her own scarf. The violence is no longer symbolic or staged. Jem's rage marks the point at which the struggle over narrative authority turns explicitly lethal, as he inflicts real harm on the woman whose resistance has destabilized the story he wants to control.

Through Jem, Pollock makes clear that what is at stake is not merely the representation of violence but the preservation of masculine narrative authority, enforced through physical coercion when women refuse to comply. Yet the scene also implicates those who watch. As representation collapses into bodily threat, spectatorship itself becomes an ethical position rather than a neutral stance. In the silence that follows the assault, Eddy, who has been watching quietly, bends toward Kate, his hand hovering near her throat, suspended between intervention and fascination. His hesitation mirrors the broader cultural posture Pollock indicts: the figure who witnesses violence, registers its intensity, and yet remains immobilized, neither fully perpetrator nor innocent bystander. Eddy's proximity without action exposes how narrative traditions like the Ripper myth rely not only on killers but on observers willing to consume violence without interrupting it. When Kate suddenly grips Eddy's arm and rasps, "Say, boss! You seem rare frightened!" (35), she breaks the illusion of detached spectatorship. Pollock refuses the comfort of passive

witnessing, insisting instead that to watch without acting is itself a form of participation.

Having been nearly choked to death, Kate recognizes that survival depends on redirecting the men's attention away from her. She presses just far enough to expose the fault line between them: Jem's desperate, unspoken love for Eddy and his need for recognition, set against the prince's categorical refusal to acknowledge any such attachment, particularly in public. When Jem insists that he would do anything for Eddy, the prince responds with cold precision: "Perhaps you misinterpret our relationship. If I loved you, which I do not! and which you must accept! Surely you'd test that love's perimeters!" (36-37).

As Eddy moves to leave, Kate, knowing she cannot be left alone with Jem, seizes control of the stage. She lifts the prince's cloak from the chair and places herself in his path, forming a calculated barrier that is at once physical and theatrical. Without Jem's permission, she launches into the fourth 'act,' inhabiting the voice and body of Catherine Eddowes, the Ripper's fourth victim. Kate deliberately appropriates Eddy's language of "perimeters," turning his term of containment into a critique of coercive intimacy and a declaration of expansive, sustaining love:

KATE: I'm in love! And me love's got no perimeters! [...] It's bigger than London and stretches further than Kent! That's a long stretch when you're hoofin' it to pick hops and the weather turns bad and back the two a you come with nothin' in your pocket but a coupla pence and a pawn ticket for a shirt! And me love's name is John and we pawned his boots and I said you go to the doss house 'cause he's not well and I'll stay on the street. He's a fine-featured man and he's got bright eyes and his last name's Kelly. And I love him, oh I do, and he loves me. (*She confronts Eddy*) Yes, love! Looove! (*She confronts Jem*) Love love love love love!!! (37)

In contrast to the men's coercive attachment, Kate frames the relationship between Kelly and Eddowes as a practice of mutual care and

material sacrifice, set against Jem and Eddy's bond, in which power is secured through control, silence, and the threat of abandonment or violence. With a simple yet radical assertion—"I'm in love"—Kate elevates relationships based on reciprocity: care enacted through shared deprivation, mutual protection, and the willingness to place another's needs above one's own. This form of love exposes the emotional poverty of the men's obsession with power, control and violence. Through Eddowes's declaration of love, Kate performs an act of ethical witness, naming relation, obligation, and loss within a narrative space otherwise organized around male desire and domination. Taking Eddy's cloak, Kate hurls it to the floor, where it becomes a stark physical stand-in for Catherine Eddowes's body on the mortuary slab. With this gesture, she summons John Kelly, and the scene shifts decisively from witness to mourning. By centering Kelly's grief, Kate introduces a form of loss largely absent from Ripper narratives: the anguish of those who loved the murdered women and are compelled to relive their deaths each time the story is retold. If Liz Stride's act gives voice to fury, Catherine Eddowes's offers something quieter but no less forceful, the enduring pain of love interrupted by senseless violence.

### **Refusing the Spectacle of Death**

While the men struggle to interpret Kate's performance, frustrated that she withholds the violent spectacle they expect, the audience is positioned differently. From the outset, they have seen Kate, the actress, shifting tactics and have grasped the stakes of her performance. What Jem reads as an unsatisfactory denial of the thrill he desires, the audience recognizes as strategy unfolding in real time: Kate, improvising, figuring out how to survive the narrative violence imposed upon her without becoming its instrument. When she suddenly seizes the knife and lunges at Jem, calling out Eddowes's name, the moment is startling, briefly reactivating the expectation that the scene will resolve through violence, but then she halts, refusing both the act and the role the narrative assigns her. Having just centered John Kelly's grief and the enduring costs of violence, she recognizes that killing Jem would conscript her into the very narrative she seeks to dismantle,

making her the violent hand that secures its closure. Her gesture, born of rage and fear, remains deliberately unfinished, a refusal of both the act and the spectacle of death. Jem and Eddy misread Kate's restraint as submission, but their relief when she lowers the knife only underscores their failure of recognition: Kate's radical act has been to reclaim authorship of the scene, refusing to let violence dictate its resolution.

Act Two opens with Jem outlining his plan to frame Montague Druitt for the Whitechapel murders. He has invited Montague to the house, intending to drug him, weigh his pockets with stones, and throw him into the Thames, leaving behind a suicide note naming him as Jack the Ripper. Cast as an act of patriotic devotion, Jem tells Eddy, "We will do that for you ... to save the throne of England and the British Empire, whether it deserves saving or not" (42).

The plan reveals not only Jem's cruelty but his commitment to a narrative logic in which violence is staged, narrated, and rendered legible as spectacle. He treats violence as repeatable and consequence-free; by framing Montague, he preserves the conditions for its repetition, ensuring the Ripper remains free both to kill again and allowing the murders to replay as spectacle. In this way, Jem reproduces the logic of narrative impunity: violence is displaced, contained within a story, and stripped of consequence for the perpetrator. Kate's refusals destabilize that logic. By insisting on names, relations, and loss, she shifts attention away from the killer toward those he seeks to erase, refusing the terms that make violence intelligible as story. Instead of reproducing a familiar arc of escalation and resolution, she withholds the satisfaction violence typically provides, and offers an ethical witnessing that keeps the women present without converting their deaths into spectacle. Kate refuses to become the agent through which violence achieves narrative closure. Deprived of the performance his script requires, Jem abandons mediation altogether. Unable to secure the story he wants, he moves from staging violence to enacting it as he assumes the killer's role himself.

JEM: Thirteen Miller Court! The room is twelve-foot square. There are four pieces of furniture, two tables, one chair, and a bed. She feels secure.

KATE: Name her!

JEM: She disrobes.

KATE: Name her!

JEM: She lies on the bed.

KATE: Name her!

JEM: She cries, oh murder! Nobody comes, she is flayed and gutted, nobody comes.

KATE: Name her!

JEM: Nobody comes.

KATE: Mary Jane Kelly!

Age 24

Somebody's baby!

Somebody's daughter!

Somebody's love! (56)

Pollock's critique of conventional Ripper narratives comes sharply into focus in this sequence. As Jem relives Mary Jane Kelly's murder with mounting excitement, Kate's repeated demand to "Name her!" interrupts the eroticized consumption of violence, by disrupting the killer-centered focalization on which the Ripper myth depends. Her insistence forces both Jem and the audience to confront Mary Jane Kelly not as a narrative prop but as "somebody's baby, somebody's daughter, somebody's love," thereby restoring relational identity at the very moment Jem's narration seeks to erase it through spectacle. What is at stake here is not guilt or innocence, but narrative authority—who determines how violence is seen and understood. Pollock stages a contest over that authority: where Jem responds to the failure of narration by collapsing representation into bodily harm, Kate reclaims control through speech and reorienting the scene's focalization away from the killer and toward the woman he seeks to erase. *She will tell the story now.*



As the play ends, Kate breaks the frame Jem has tried to impose and claims the narrative as her own. She does this by delivering a series of statements that fix the future rather than reenact the past: Montague's body will be found in the Thames, the investigation will quietly close, and police presence in Whitechapel will diminish. She then extends this narration to the men themselves first foretelling Eddy's early death and then Jem's eventual descent into mania and death. These statements do not operate as prophecy so much as narrative accountability. By naming what will follow, Kate reclaims narrative as a mechanism of consequence, refusing the erasures that sustain narrative impunity. In theatrical terms, she becomes the author without becoming the killer. Her authority rests not in the capacity to wound, but in the power to assign consequence. By fixing outcomes through speech rather than force, Pollock offers a model of feminist performance grounded in a refusal of spectacle, in which accountability replaces violence and narrative becomes a site of ethical reckoning.

## Conclusion

The dominant Jack the Ripper narrative has long conferred agency, mystery, and even charisma on the murderer while collapsing the women he killed into a single, dehumanizing category. This narrative violence renders women's lives disposable within the story itself and reinforces the logic of narrative impunity, in which perpetrators of gendered violence are insulated, even celebrated, through the stories told about them. Together, these practices function as a cultural alibi that obscures violence by embedding it within a familiar and consumable script. In *Saucy Jack*, Pollock confronts this logic by dismantling the representational strategies that sustain Ripper mythology—killer-centered focalization, silence around the women's lives, and the aestheticization of death through spectacle. Pollock's decision to place an actress at the center of the play is crucial. Because the Ripper story has always been performative, foregrounding Kate exposes how sensational histories are staged, circulated, and consumed. Kate's performances for Jem and Eddy reveal the mechanics

of Ripper mythology while refusing its pleasures, forcing accountability from those who treat violence as entertainment. Theatre becomes a mode of resistance: it calls out voyeurism, redirects attention from male domination to female endurance and memory, and uses embodiment—breath, gesture, vulnerability, communal witnessing—to counter the distancing effects of traditional historiography. Through Kate, Pollock reclaims Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Liz Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly from myth and returns them to history as women who struggled in life and were mourned in death. By shifting attention from the killer's mystique to the women's lives and to the social conditions that rendered those lives vulnerable, Pollock demonstrates that how violence is told determines whose deaths are mourned, whose suffering is minimized, and whose accountability is deferred. By reclaiming narrative authority from the killer and restoring it to the women whose lives were taken, *Saucy Jack* transforms the Ripper story from an object of fascination into a site of ethical reckoning—one that demands responsibility from those who tell it, watch it, and profit from it.

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## **Biography**

**Jennifer Jones Cavanaugh** is Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Theatre at the University of Richmond. Her scholarship focuses on theatre and performance history, with particular attention to gender, popular entertainment, and the cultural

politics of performance. Her recent work examines feminist reinterpretations of Jack the Ripper narratives in contemporary theatre. She is also an active director and dramaturg whose productions explore the intersections of performance, history, and cultural memory.