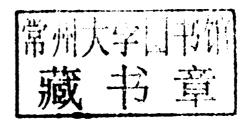




Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction

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Fig. 1 Advertisement for Hudson's Soap, *Graphic*, 1 December 1888, 587.

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Introduction (Mrs.) Hudson's Soap: Reading Purity in Detective Fiction

London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.

—Arthur Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet1

Theorising Purity

On 1 December 1888, the London newspaper the Graphic published a fullpage advertisement for Hudson's Soap (Figure 1). Of the various commodities advertised in the back pages of the newspaper, soap was one of the most frequently featured, and manufacturers placed weekly adverts which drew upon a stock of familiar images to render their brands recognisable (one of the more prominent campaigns being that for Brooke's Monkey Brand soap, the adverts for which always featured a grinning monkey and the slogan 'Won't wash clothes'). Such adverts usually located the commodity in the realm of the domestic, as a cleanser of clothes, people and household items. They drew upon a certain stock of images and constructions, or as Anne McClintock argues, four 'fetishes': 'soap itself, white clothing (especially aprons), mirrors and monkeys.'2 In contrast, the Hudson's Soap advert of 1888 drew on visual and ideological cues that belonged to a different discursive field. The figure in the advert was a policeman rather than a monkey, and the setting was not domestic, but a dark London alleyway. The scene portrays a policeman shining a lamp onto a poster bearing the exhortation to 'ARREST all Dirt and cleanse Everything BY USING HUDSON'S SOAP. REWARD!! PURITY, HEALTH & SATISFACTION BY ITS REGULAR DAILY USE' (Figure 1). Somewhat strangely, and perhaps historically inaccurately, the poster stands alone on the wall; this is not the visual overload of modernity, or a Benjaminian rendering of a single image into a mechanical set of repetitions (as in the posting of multiple copies of posters), which then dialectically alter the image and the environment in which it stands. Rather, this is a declaration, made as much so by its uncharacteristic isolation as by its capitals and double exclamation marks.

The ideological work of this advertisement demonstrates the connections between discourses about the criminal and a state of (im)purity, the concern of this

Arthur Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet (1887; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 10.

² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 214.

book. The slogan 'Arrest all dirt and cleanse everything' establishes a relationship between crime and dirt, and between detection and cleansing, in six words. Nor is this a formulation limited to either the public business of the police, or the private realm of washing; the specification of 'all' dirt, and the project to 'cleanse everything' ambitiously implies the benefits of cleanliness across the whole of society and culture. In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White briefly discuss a later version of this advert published in 1891, one in which the poster which the policeman reads has a different, more detailed (and conversely less emphatic) text, and which lacks the key term 'purity.'3 Similarly, Stallybrass and White only situate the image in a very broad historical context of late nineteenth-century imperialism, missing the fact that the advert first appeared at a very specific moment in criminal history, just weeks after the Whitechapel murders of Jack the Ripper.⁴ In September to November of 1888, five prostitutes (Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Catherine Eddowes, Elizabeth Stride and Mary Kelly) were murdered and mutilated. While the Graphic largely stayed away from the sensationalist reportage of the murders featured in publications such as the Illustrated Police News and the Star, offering a sanitised version of the events in Whitechapel, the advert would certainly have resonated with recent events.

The reward for arresting the dirt, the criminal, is 'Purity, Health & Satisfaction,' rendered visually in the policeman's cleansing beam of light. This was already a familiar visual trope frequently used in crime reportage of the time, such as that of the Ripper murders, as well as parodies of such reportage featured in *Punch*. The iconography of such reports was unambiguous, as it is here: the white brightness of the police lamp (order, purity, cleanliness) in opposition to the dark, uneven fencing of the alley. Similarly, the edges of the beam emphasise at the top 'Arrest' and, at the bottom, 'Purity,' suggesting that one leads to the other. The London setting is clearly shown by the appearance of the Palace of Westminster over the fence (and, in terms of advertising composition, occupying the crucial position of

³ See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 134.

⁴ For analysis of the Whitechapel murders, see Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (London: Virago, 1992), 191–228; Christopher Frayling, 'The House that Jack Built: Some Stereotypes of the Rapist in the History of Popular Culture,' in Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (eds.), *Rape: An Historical and Cultural Enquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996), 174–215; W. J. Fishman, *East End 1888: A Year in a London Borough Among the Labouring Poor* (London: Hanbury, 2001); Andrew Smith, *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the* Fin-de-Siècle (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004), 67–94.

The centrality of the beam to the advertisement also bears out Sara Thornton's assertion that Victorian advertising 'relied on artificial light' (7), especially regarding the role of the development of gas lighting in extending 'the surfaces available for display, helping to colonize previously unusable darkness' (7). See Sara Thornton, *Advertising, Subjectivity and the Nineteenth-Century Novel: Dickens, Balzac and the Language of the Walls* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

bisecting the brand name) which while meaning that the policeman is not exactly in the East End, nonetheless places the advert in a city recently connected with murderous atrocity; furthermore, an atrocity which in its negotiations between crime and vice carried certain echoes of the social purity debate.

I shall return to this advertisement towards the end of this introduction. In the meantime, it serves as a convenient illustration of the wider argument of this book, that late Victorian detective fiction dramatises an anxiety about material contamination and impurity, including a metaphorical category of crime as dirt, and aligns detection with the act of cleaning in exactly the way that the Hudson's advertisement does. I consider the political aspects of such ideas, particularly in terms of social investigations among the 'great unwashed' (a term first used in crime fiction, in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's Paul Clifford (1830)) and social purity campaigns.⁶ Yet such an analysis accepts the categories of 'pure' and 'impure' without subjecting these to interrogation. What is actually meant by purity, and why is it so valued? Central to such discussions is Mary Douglas's Purity and Danger (1966). Douglas's anthropological exploration of the pollution rituals of various cultures is built around the key insight that 'dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.'7 What is dirty or impure is that which is out of place, that which does not fit into a certain order:

We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. ... Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the diningtable; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing.⁸

It follows, therefore, that systems, orders and laws create their own dirt and impurities. Douglas attributes the insight that dirt is simply 'matter out of place' to the eighteenth-century man of letters Lord Chesterfield, but in so doing passes over various Victorian manifestations of the concept, especially towards the end of the century. Alfred Russel Wallace, in his discussion of the importance of dust in *The Wonderful Century: Its Successes and Failures* (1898) similarly defined dirt as 'matter in the wrong place,' although he saw in such dirt a threat to health rather than the symbolic disorder Douglas identifies; Wallace's ideas of dirt are more medical materialist than structuralist. Likewise, in the same year, the physician and social purist Elizabeth Blackwell noted in her *Scientific Method in Biology*

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Paul Clifford (New York: Collins and Hannay, 1830), xiii.

Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966; London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁸ Ibid., 44-5.

⁹ Alfred Russel Wallace, The Wonderful Century: Its Successes and Failures (1898; New York: Cosimo, 2007), 69.

that 'Dirt in its largest sense [is] matter in the wrong place.' Douglas develops this point to argue that pollution behaviours are a positive effort to organise an environment, rather than solely being a reaction of fear:

In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience. 11

The passage here hints at Douglas's scepticism of medical materialism as an explanation for our reactions to dirt (at least, where medical materialism is invoked as a totalising alternative to any other, symbolic, explanation);¹² indeed, she argues that 'Often our justification of our own avoidances through hygiene is sheer fantasy.'13 Kelly Hurley, however, sees another potential meaning in Douglas's analysis: that the formulation 'matter out of place' emphasises the functionality of classificatory schema according to which 'anomalous phenomena are abominable because they throw into relief the provisionality of the categories they confound.'14 This is only implicit in Douglas's work; its more immediate concern (and one which Hurley finds less convincing) is the comparison it draws between the primitive cultures it explores and our own, arguing that our pollution behaviours are the same as those of apparently 'superstitious' tribes: 'The difference between us is not that our behaviour is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning.'15 Our fear of dirt as creating disease is based in the same kind of symbolism as the tribal superstition, since we overestimate both the efficacy of cleansing rituals (passing food through water, for example, is hardly enough to eradicate bacteria), and the potential of dirt to infect (as Douglas comments, 'Dirt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous'). 16 The hyperbole of threatening dirt is at the heart of the Hudson's advertisement described above, and therefore at the heart of much of the detective fiction of the 1890s; the exaggerated power of cleansing rituals must be strong enough to counter the equally inflated threat of the dirty, the infected, the criminal. Of course, Douglas's analysis would not have been possible in the mid-nineteenth century, when the miasmic theory of illness directly equated dirt with disease, as is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The passing of the theory in favour of the theory of contagion, however, allowed new rhetorical moves to be made.

Elizabeth Blackwell, Scientific Method in Biology (London: Elliot Stock, 1898), 65.

¹¹ Douglas, Purity and Danger, 3.

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the* Fin de Siècle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25. Original emphasis.

Douglas, Purity and Danger, 85.

¹⁶ Ibid., xi.

If Douglas's work is an attempt to account for dirt in terms beyond those of anxiety, her influence has been greatest on those who have focused more closely on those very responses. For example, in Violence and the Sacred (1972), René Girard draws on Douglas's structuralist anthropology in his poststructuralist discussion of violence and impurity, arguing that 'All concepts of impurity stem ultimately from the community's fear of a perpetual cycle of violence arising in its midst.'17 Violence is, for Girard, a contamination since it has the potential to spread through a whole community through acts of reprisal and revenge, in which a 'final' revenge is constantly deferred unless deflected by the 'purifying' violence of the sacrifice of a surrogate figure outside the process of contamination. 18 Girard connects such processes directly to criminality as impurity when he comments (perhaps a little too glibly) that 'As a general practice, it is wise to avoid contact with the sick if one wishes to stay healthy. Similarly, [within this model] it is wise to steer clear of homicides if one is eager not to be killed.'19 Such contagious violence is intimately connected to Douglas's model of categorisation and differentiation, Girard commenting that 'ritual impurity is linked to the dissolution of distinctions between individuals and institutions.'20 However, a more influential development of Douglas is that by Julia Kristeva in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1982). Here, Kristeva uses Douglas's theory of matter out of place to construct a psychoanalytic model which challenges both the Freudian privileging of desire and a model of phobia centred on the object. Kristeva is more interested in the psychoanalytic influence of drives of horror and disgust, which she locates in the concept of the abject. The abject is that which has to be expelled from the body to become social, matter such as vomit, faeces, and blood: 'refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.'21 Kristeva draws on Douglas's assertion that 'All margins are dangerous, especially those of the body: Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body."²² Thus, Kristeva argues that abjection is caused by 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. 23 The illusion of a continuous, homogenous subject is maintained by the rejection of such anomalies, substances which represent the breach of a subjective boundary. However, for Kristeva, these acts of expulsion are never complete, as the expelled elements remain on the edge of the subject's identity and threaten it with disorder

¹⁷ René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (1972; London: Continuum, 2005), 37.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3. Original emphasis.

²² Douglas, Purity and Danger, 150.

²³ Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 4.

('the jettisoned object ... draws me towards the place where meaning collapses'). 24 The power of the abject is to offer the dissolution of the boundaries which constitute identity, and although it acts through such liminal substances, Kristeva is careful not to fully identify the abject with them, since to do so would be to reinstate a Freudian psychoanalysis of phobia, based on objects: 'The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.'25

The arguments of Douglas and Kristeva both have nineteenth-century antecedents. I have already noted the Victorian ghosts behind Douglas's statement regarding the relativity of dirt; Douglas herself is aware of how Darwinian theory impacts on her anthropological work: 'Now that we have recognised and assimilated our common descent with apes nothing can happen in the field of animal taxonomy to rouse our concern. This is one reason why cosmic pollution is more difficult for us to understand than social pollutions of which we have some personal experience.'26 Similarly, Kelly Hurley, in her analysis of late Victorian gothic narratives, has commented that Kristeva's model 'could not have been conceived without benefit of fin-de-siècle models of the abhuman subject drawn from both pre- or proto-Freudian psychology and a constellation of evolutionist discourses.'27 In turn, Kristeva's model has proved fruitful for re-readings of the nineteenth century, not least in Anne McClintock's utilisation of the idea of the abject in her discussion of the imperial project (in particular, the role of the colonial servant as a necessary part of Western domesticity). Such connections are unsurprising given the centrality of dirt and impurity as Victorian cultural categories. Purity was an overdetermined term for the late Victorians. Discourses of degeneration and eugenics applied it to racial debates; concern over the adulteration of food and sanitation of urban spaces made it a matter of public health. The expression was an advertising buzzword, used to promote soap, cocoa, alcohol, and a wide range of self-medications. Impurity as crime also had more concrete manifestations, for instance in concerns over adulteration of foodstuffs, and the fear that consumers were slowly being poisoned. The term 'pure' became a fetish of advertising, unsurprising given some of the statistics gathered by the

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

The work of Douglas and Kristeva is not without its critics. David Trotter, whose Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) is an important discussion of what he terms 'mess theory,' argues that their work is too generalizing: 'After all, the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite account between them for a very large proportion of human experience; if these disturbances were consistently to provoke abjection, we should all feel abject all the time. By the same token, there surely are other events, such as a lack of cleanliness or health, which nauseate us without unsettling any symbolic universes' (159). See also David Sibley's Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West (London: Routledge, 1995), 37–8, in which Sibley notes that Douglas's model requires some clarification in terms of time and space.

Douglas, Purity and Danger, 91.

Hurley, Gothic Body, 11.

Local Government Board: in 1877, a quarter of all milk examined was found to be seriously adulterated, and it was not until 1894 that this figure fell below 10 per cent.²⁸ As the Veneerings' retainer appears to think in that pre-eminent Victorian novel of dirt, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), 'Chablis, Sir ... You wouldn't if you knew what it's made of.'²⁹ Anthony Wohl provides a dizzying list of the materials used to supplement produce:

The list of poisonous additives reads like the stock list of some mad and malevolent chemist: strychnine, cocculus, indicus (both are hallucinogens) and copperas in rum and beer; sulphate of copper in pickles, bottled fruit, wine and preserves; lead chromate in mustard and snuff; sulphate of iron in tea and beer; ferric ferrocyanide, lime sulphate and turmeric in Chinese tea; copper carbonate, lead sulphate, bisulphate of mercury, and Venetian lead in sugar confectionery and chocolate; lead in wine and cider.³⁰

As Wohl points out, the cumulative effect of these additives often led to fatal food poisoning. Although the poisoning of poorer consumers was a crime both too vast and too gradual to feature in the detective fiction of the 1890s, concerns over the adulteration of food certainly inform stories such as Arthur Morrison's 1896 story 'The Case of the Lost Foreigner,' in which his detective Martin Hewitt foils the plans of an anarchist gang who have concealed lethal bombs in loaves of bread.³¹ Such adulteration led to 'purity' and 'pure' becoming indispensable advertising tropes. Fin de siècle advertisements in periodicals such as the Strand Magazine (the monthly in which much of the detective fiction of the late nineteenth century was published) boasted of the efficacy of products by stressing they were free of contamination. Soap advertisements were particularly fond of this approach, including Titan Patent Soap ('Pure and Safe'), Hydroleine Powder ('Hydroleine for purity and excellence'), and Hudson's Soap. Salvine Scientific Dentrifice and Soap ('the purest and most agreeable') had a more sophisticated approach, guaranteeing 'Purity Absolute. Entirely Innocent of Colouring or Extraneous Matter.' The slogan is rich in subtext: describing a product as 'innocent' introduces the language of criminality and relates it to the foreign-ness of extraneous matter (which gives another dimension to the threat of 'colouring'), although what is of particular interest is the awareness of dirt as matter out of place, extraneous material. It is not perhaps surprising that cleansing agents were sold on the basis of their lack of contaminating dirt, but more significant that other products should play on these concerns; a handful of examples taken from the Strand Magazine between 1891 and 1892 include Cadbury's Cocoa ('Absolutely Pure'), Allen and

²⁸ Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: Methuen, 1983), 21.

²⁹ Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend (1865; London: Penguin, 2004), 20.

³⁰ Ibid., 53.

Arthur Morrison, *Chronicles of Martin Hewitt:* 'The Case of the Lost Foreigner,' *Windsor Magazine* 1 (1895): 630–43.

Hanbury's Castor Oil ('Tasteless. Pure. Active'), and Dowd's Sulphur Salt ('the most reliable Blood Purifying Medicine extant'). Even the kind of vices at which more zealous Puritans would have baulked were advertised in such terms: A & R cigarette papers were the 'Best & Purest,' a slogan also employed to sell Mason's Wine Essences.

The term 'social purity,' however, had a more specific meaning as the guiding principle of a number of associations, societies, and vigilance committees founded in the nineteenth century, with the aim of policing sexual purity and morality. As Margaret Hunt notes, for the social purists (or more specifically, the social purists of the 1890s) 'sex and sexuality are deeply problematic drives, which unless tightly controlled will spill out into society and cause untold harm.'33 Just as the 1880s and 1890s saw the development of the modern genre of detective fiction as a recognisable mode of literature (R. F. Stewart traces the origin of the term to the Saturday Review of 4 December 1886, and its article 'Detective Fiction').³⁴ spurred by changes in publishing culture and the periodical press, the same period was one of the peaks of anti-vice agitation in British history.³⁵ The later nineteenth century saw the foundation of a number of purity movements, including Josephine Butler's Social Purity Alliance in 1873, Ellice Hopkins's White Cross Movement in 1875, and the National Vigilance Association, run by William Coote and launched by W. T. Stead at a demonstration in Hyde Park on 22 August 1885 (Stead's involvement with social purity is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1). Many of these associations, characterised by what Edward J. Bristow describes as a background of holy militancy, were based in a movement against the sexual double standard which excused the use of (often young) prostitutes in order to preserve the purity of the domestic family.³⁶ Thus, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, were seen as legal endorsement of this double standard, being laws in which prostitutes (or any woman suspected of prostitution) in garrison towns were legally obliged to submit to medical examination. The law was controversial in that it excused male sexual incontinence by making the female body the site of disease and by using the apparatus of the prison to control 'unfit' women. More widely, the debate over the Contagious Diseases Acts raised the question of who exactly could be termed 'pure,' and who had the political power to make such definitions. Josephine Butler, the leader of the repeal movement,

³² See the advertising supplements included in the *Strand Magazine*, volumes 1–3 (1890–91).

Margaret Hunt, 'The De-eroticization of Women's Liberation: Social Purity Movements and the Revolutionary Feminism of Sheila Jeffreys,' *Feminist Review* 34 (1990): 23–46. 25.

³⁴ R. F. Stewart, *And Always a Detective: Chapters on the History of Detective Fiction* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1980), 27.

³⁵ Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 2.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

argued in 1870 that the impurity of sexual disease was 'almost universal at one time or another'37 among men and condemned the Contagious Diseases Acts as 'This legislation of vice, which is the endorsement of the "necessity" of impurity for men, and the institution of the slavery of women.'38 The most extreme development of this argument took the form of accusing the Admiralty of using prostitutes as scapegoats to obscure homosexuality in the navy.³⁹ Nevertheless, Butler was sophisticated enough to recognise that the Acts themselves had their political uses. In an 1871 address, Butler argued that before the Acts, a crusade against prostitution would have been 'too Herculean a task to dream of'; the Acts, by focusing public opinion on the matter, thus presented 'the permission of an evil, terrible in itself, but out of which good will come.'40 Following the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the politics of purity led to the creation of a new kind of social purity movement, driven by the more repressive arguments of Ellice Hopkins and Laura Ormiston Chant, for whom the prostitute was the problem. Such a stance was disturbing to Butler, as she made clear in 1897 when she warned colleagues about the repressive nature of the social purists:

It may surprise and shock some who read these lines that I should say (yet I must say it), beware of purity workers in our warfare. ... We have learned that it is not unusual for men and women to discourse eloquently in public, of the home, of conjugal life, of the divinity of womanhood ... and yet to be ready to accept and endorse any amount of coercive and degrading treatment of their fellow creatures, in the fatuous belief that you can oblige human beings to be moral by force, and in so doing that you may in some way promote social purity!⁴¹

The launch of the National Vigilance Association in 1885 was fuelled by the publication in the same year of W. T. Stead's exposé of child procurement, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.' The response to the 'Maiden Tribute' illustrated how easily purity movements could themselves be constructed as impure; W. H. Smith banned the *Pall Mall Gazette* while the series ran, while the *Evening News* compared the articles to 'a vile insect reared on the putrid garbage of the dunghill.'⁴² The purity societies themselves often played on the trope of moral impurity as actual dirt. In 1908 the National Social Purity Crusade published *The Cleansing of a City*, an anthology of articles addressing a number of 'impurities,' primarily the popular reading of youth ('this pernicious stuff') and the influx of foreign 'bullies' or pimps.⁴³ Two articles by Arnold White and

³⁷ Quoted in Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). 130.

³⁸ Josephine E. Butler, *Social Purity: An Address* (London: Dyer Brothers, 1881), 39.

³⁹ Walkowitz, Prostitution, 130.

Quoted in Bristow, Vice and Vigilance, 75.

⁴¹ Quoted in Walkowitz, *Prostitution*, 252.

⁴² Quoted in Bristow, Vice and Vigilance, 110.

The Cleansing of a City (London: Greening & Co, 1908), 64.