



“The blindest of the blind”: Blind Men, Beggars, and Murderers in Catherine Crowe’s Crime Fiction

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Abstract. Catherine Crowe portrays literal and figurative blindness in the proto-detective stories *Men and Women* (1843), *Lilly Dawson* (1847), and “The Blind Witness and His Dog” (1849). Embodied and metaphorical blindness propose competing forms of knowledge, sympathetic and diagnostic, revealing the optocentric biases that limit the Victorian criminal court’s means of detection.

The pioneering crime fictions of popular Victorian novelist Catherine Crowe (1790–1872) often emphasize the visionary capabilities of sleuths and detective characters who reject objective vision in favor of preternatural second sight or nonvisual cues. These subjective insights enable marginalized characters to access investigations in lieu of the exclusive expertise wielded by rationalist investigators, such as C. Auguste Dupin or Sherlock Holmes, who embody the detective novel’s masculine “legacy of positivist knowledge” and implicit “faith in the eye as an error-free, non-interfering conduit” for observation (Palmer 56; Smajić 71). The nonvisual sensory experiences of the titular witness of “The Blind Witness and His Dog” (1849), who solves a murder using primarily aural clues, and another insightful blind man, Abel White, mentor of the eponymous sleuth-heroine in *The Story of Lilly Dawson* (1847), complicate the sighted practices of witnessing and observing that otherwise proliferate in these proto-detective narratives. Alongside depictions of embodied blindness, Crowe uses metaphorical blindness to describe the perpetrators of crime in *Lilly Dawson* and a second proto-detective novel, *Men and Women; or, Manorial Rights* (1843), to further illustrate how the criminal courts in these stories are inculcated with the language of vision and dominated by a pathologizing gaze. The figuratively blind criminals, Luke Littenhaus and Vincent Groves, form

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