Gender and Petty Violence in London, 1680-1720
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two-thirds of all Londoners who came before the Westminster Quarter Sessions brought complaints about male attackers. Though—as chapter 5 will argue—feminine violence was not insignificant and came in many forms, we cannot deny that masculine violence was far more prevalent. Male aggression was not allowed to flourish unhindered, however, and we will explore some examples of prosecutions directed specifically at men. This chapter takes up a common theme in the book: that the dichotomies of weak female and powerful male so prominent on the surface of early modern life often become blurred when we take a closer look.

The first two sections of the chapter are concerned with male sexual violence. Sexual violence was (and is) overwhelmingly masculine. Both men and women prosecuted sexual assaults, but the targets of such prosecutions were almost always men. The laws against sexual violence were made to constrain male behavior, and the successful prosecution of sexual violence delineated appropriate forms of masculine sexuality. The first section underscores the fact that within the legal system victims of attempted rape received more satisfaction than victims of rape. It seems likely that sexual assault victims were aware of this and may have even reduced their charges to increase the likelihood of obtaining satisfaction through the courts.

However, even the unsuccessful prosecution of sexual violence had an impact on men. We can see all of the sexual assault prosecutions as attempts to curb male sexual aggression, and this is another area where the sexual dou-
ble standard was less prominent. To discuss rape in the context of “petty” violence may seem to trivialize a horrible crime. However, the English courts’ acquittal of 80 percent of all men charged with rape shows that, in practice, this capital crime was not taken very seriously. It is difficult to argue that eighteenth-century women were empowered by rape prosecution, but we will at least see that men were somewhat disempowered as defendants in such cases. The evidence of the policing of male heterosexuality adds to the scholarship on the ways that cultural norms circumscribed male heterosexual behavior.

The Mohock scare is a more self-contained example of prosecutors’ power in curbing male violence. The Mohocks, as we will see, were a group of elite male rakes who terrorized Londoners at night in 1712. The popular press depicted these young men as slitting open people’s noses and lifting women’s dresses in the streets, but the magnitude of their assaults was hugely exaggerated. Nevertheless, the fictitious male youth violence of the Mohocks provoked a very real retaliation among the London public in subsequent years. Previous historians have been unable to statistically analyze the impact of the Mohocks, but we will see that a markedly greater number of gentlemen were prosecuted for assaults after 1712 than before. The anxiety over Mohock violence caused a sort of moral panic in the metropolis, and its victims united to curb this form of male aggression.

One of the largest obstacles faced by female rape prosecutors was the early modern perception of mendacity and sexual insatiability as distinctly feminine traits. Victims invariably battled hostile questioning and presentation of evidence about their credibility and moral character. Men on trial for rape frequently claimed that their prosecutor had falsely accused them, expecting them to pay her to drop the suit. This pattern was so common—and so successful—a defense strategy in rape cases that legal historians have since dubbed it “the blackmail myth.” It is not surprising, therefore, that rape prosecutions were at their most powerful in their earliest stage. Immediately after the crime had occurred, rape victims bore the visible marks of male sexual violence. In 1718, a woman came to a JP’s clerk for a warrant to arrest her rapist. The clerk saw her “sobbing and crying so that she could not for some time speak and tell him what she came about . . . [and] when she came her Clothes were much rumpled, her Arms bruised, and, as she said, was hurt in other Parts, which he did not inquire into.” At this stage of the criminal process, the victim’s silence over the details of the attack worked against the
man accused. His only tools of self-advocacy were verbal denials, which were much less powerful in comparison to the silent, physical attestations of the woman’s bruising, torn clothing, and sobbing. What was left unsaid communicated much more than explicit detail would have at this stage. The eventual trial, held long after the prosecutor’s bruises had healed, brought verbal description back to the fore and allowed the defendant to marshal witnesses to question the victim’s “character” and credibility to secure his victory. At this stage feminine modesty gave the jury an excuse for acquittal: if the woman did not describe the details of rape, it left open the possibility that the rape had not occurred at all. The initiation of prosecution, in contrast, was much more in the woman’s favor. Here, feminine reticence effectively silenced the man accused of raping her, because, aside from the charge of rape, there were no concrete details to deny.

A similar advantage might be gained by women who chose to bind a sexual assailant over in a recognizance. Such prosecutions usually described an attempted rape, but it seems likely that some women could have chosen to characterize a much more serious attack in this way in order to avoid prosecuting through the higher courts. They faced a more hostile audience in the latter and had a lesser likelihood of receiving satisfaction than they did before a JP. Many more men were bound for the misdemeanor of attempted rape at Westminster Quarter Sessions than were convicted of the felony of rape at the Old Bailey. Dorothy Pooley convinced Justice Thomas Railton to bind James Pawlet to appear “for endeavouring to debauch” her. Elinor Punt had barber Patrick Smith bound over “for Endeavouring & using all the forceable ways and means he could to Ravish” her. Justices frequently showed their willingness to bind over putative rapists.

Though recognizances might simply refer vaguely to the “undesent manner” of the assault, they could just as often portray quite explicitly the sexual aspects which had been deemed unacceptable. Elizabeth Meers said that Henry Chamberlayne, a gentleman, put “his Members into her hand” in the street and frightened her, and Hester Coe asked that yeoman Andrew Montiere be bound for “taking up her cotes and pulling oute his private parts attempting thereby to Ravish her.” Male sexual transgression might include invasion of territory beyond the body, as in the case of Richard Tabor, specifically charged with having “forced himself into” Rebecca Marther’s chamber. Tabor “very rudely” abused Marther “by thrusting his hands into the bed where she was naked.” Elizabeth Nicholly claimed that George Watson had assaulted her “in her own Lodging” and had tried “to comitt a rape on her body,” and she convinced the JP to bind him over for it. Judicial vigilance is also very strong in the recognizance brought against Richard Backwell.
“for incessantly haunting” Jane Ball, “notwithstanding his being forbid her company,” or that against Richard Price for “his second attempt to Debauch” Eleanor Prifffins.” Rather than turning a blind eye to male sexual proclivities, Westminster magistrates granted credibility to women’s complaints and condemned many sexual encounters as assault.

One of the few remaining justicing notebooks sheds some light upon what might occur when a woman approached a JP to complain about male sexual violence. Wiltshire Justice William Hunt kept a notebook to record the many settlements he had orchestrated informally as part of his official magistrate duties. On June, 28, 1745, Hunt “granted a warrant against John Newman . . . for . . . assaulting [Jane Biggs] with intent to have carnal knowledge of her body,” and Hunt found that “the fact was so clearly proved upon him, . . . that I adjudged him to pay unto [Bigg’s husband] for damages 5 guineas, and at the same time [Newman] entered into a bond penalty £100 never to molest John Biggs or his wife any more.” When Anne Heath accused Samuel Perrat of “assaulting her with intention to lie with her,” Hunt forced him to pay her eight shillings in compensation, and Edward Coles had to pay “three guineas” for attempting “to ravish” a fellow townsman, “besides entering into a bond of £50 penalty never to molest” her and her husband in the future. Hunt found Rebecca Phillpot’s charge that John Holmes had tried to rape her sufficiently convincing to issue a warrant for his arrest. Holmes was so frightened by the warrant that he “absconded.” Antony Simpson recognized the advantage, though slight, accorded “the unknown number of rape victims who were forced to settle for a public apology and perhaps a small sum of money in a magistrate’s court” over those who pursued their charge to a trial. At this lower level of the court system, female victims were more likely to be believed, and male sexual violence was acknowledged and punished.

The parish had a vested interest in punishing lewd attacks by men. John Broe had to “find sufficient securitis to indemnify the parrish” after he had assaulted Mary Spiny “by throwing her downe in a stable laying with her and giving her the Foul disease whereby she is chargable to the parish.” One wonders if Broe would have been punished at all if Spiny had not caught the venereal disease that made her a parish charge, but their case nevertheless stands as another example of a curb on male sexual violence. Similarly, Mary Fuller testified to the Westminster Bastardy Examiner that “Thomas, one of Mr. Neal’s carters” was father of her unborn baby and that he had “made her drink so much strong Drink . . . [that] she was overcome with the said Drink & . . . was persuaded to goe & Lye with him.” John and Thomas were censured only indirectly for assaulting these women, but Mary Spiny and Mary
Fuller used the self-interest of the parish to document the violence against them and see their attackers punished in some way.

Elizabeth Sample was another victim of male sexual aggression who was somewhat empowered. She was a married woman but was picked up by Constable William Lovelace and bound for “making a great noyse in a tavern in Company with fower men (whome she did not know) one of which pickt her up in the streete and receiving from each of them halfe a Crowne to show them postures.”

The imagery of a woman willing to go to a tavern with strange men she met on the street was no doubt purposely included in the recognizance to allow officials a full sense of her questionable morality. Nevertheless, the JP allowed Elizabeth Sample to log a complaint giving her own version of the night’s events. A recognizance was drawn up on the same day as Constable Lovelace’s, which bound John Hasting and Terrell Cooke, gentlemen, along with watchmaker John Sutton and vintner Henry Turner—the four men Sample was found with in the tavern—to appear to answer Sample. In her version, the men were “assaulting beating and bruising her taring her clothes and causing her thereby to loose her EareRings.” Thus, Sample ensured that the charges alleging her lewdness were, if not eradicated, at least balanced by her counterclaim of having instead been nonconsenting and victimized. By convincing the Justice of the Peace to issue a recognizance, Sample capitalized on the court’s tacit disapproval of male libertinism in her description of the actions of Hasting, Cooke, Sutton, and Turner.

Men were also occasionally the victims of male sexual violence, and the courts found this form of attack particularly repugnant. Westminster JP’s carefully recorded prosecutions of London men for this “sinful” act, often in great detail. Francis Hollis charged John Jeffries with “Picking him up in the Parke & kissing him, ... putting his hand in his codpiece & feeling his members [and] ... also telling him that every one had their way & that was his: with several other obscene expressions.” Similarly, Humphrey Bowen claimed that “gentleman” William Gage had “used all the Inticinge Actions hee could to draw ... Bowen ... to commit with him ... the abominable and detestable sin of Buggery And after they were out of the house and in the streets Mr Gage drew his yard privately and put it into ... Bowen’s ... hand.” Although Randolph Trumbach has argued that “the most daringly masculine men had ... sexual relations with both women and adolescent males” during this period, it is clear that the majority of London society—including its courts—abhorred sodomy. The idea of one man trying to force another to commit buggery was especially objectionable, and homosexual male violence was probably treated more seriously than most heterosexual rapes.
Both men and women came before the Westminster JPs to prosecute male sexual violence, and the latter, especially, found this lower level of the justice system much more satisfactory than a full trial at the Old Bailey. Those who described more minor sexual assaults and sought a recognizance would not find their credibility questioned to as great a degree—nor would they be exposed to as much general hostility—as those who sought to prosecute a felonious sexual assault in London’s higher court. As we have seen, these victims also often saw more remedy with a lesser charge. They weighed the greater likelihood of their attackers receiving a fine before a magistrate against a probable acquittal before an Old Bailey jury, and chose accordingly.

It is thus more difficult to see how most of the men tried for rape at the Old Bailey experienced much discomfort. Given the low rate of success of women’s rape prosecutions, we might understandably conclude that they failed to curb male sexual violence. This is true for the most part, but—in very small subtle ways—male sexual violence was at least problematized by rape prosecutions. This line of argument may seem dangerously counterintuitive because it goes against the obvious fact that the prosecution of rape generally victimized women a second time. However, without denying the fact that eighteenth-century rape trials were less humane toward the female victims of rape than to the men they charged, it is still possible to glimpse a slight constraint upon male violence in the law against rape.

In the early modern concept of heterosexual sex, “normal” intercourse was commonly conceived as an aggressive male overpowering a reluctant female. Early modern women who had sex were “used” by their partners—in their own minds as well as those of the men who “used” them.28 The construction of the “normal” heterosexual encounter as one of a voracious man preying upon a reluctant woman is illustrated by Henry Hurt’s trial at the Old Bailey in 1717. Hurt, accused of raping “one Mary Lye, a Virgin of 13 years of age,” claimed instead that consensual sex had occurred. Hurt defended himself by “saying that he indeed was eager and she not very unwilling,” showing that, even in licit sex, a man’s role was highly aggressive in contrast to the submissiveness of his partner.29 The jury echoed this perception, acquitting Hurt because “it appeared that the Unwillingness was at least a willing one.”30 However, the fact that many heterosexual encounters, popularly conceived as “normal,” could at least be prosecuted as rape may indicate that men could not enjoy complete sexual freedom. Had the legal definition of rape as “the carnal knowledge of a woman . . . against her will” been totally without wider
social foundation, women would not have even thought about initiating prosecutions. Mary Lye's charges against Hurt had sufficient merit to win an indictment before a grand jury. Notwithstanding their low rate of ultimate success, the prosecutions that did occur represent an alternative concept of appropriate sex. Rape's existence in the law books negates the idea that a man overpowering his female partner in order to penetrate her constituted a "natural" sex act.

Society sometimes agreed with the female victims of rape, even when the courts did not. Sibyl May, an elderly woman, claimed to have been raped in the course of a robbery. May's rapist was acquitted by the jury, but the report of her trial in the _OBP_ told Londoners that she had indeed been raped and that the defendant was acquitted only because he had blindfolded her so that she could not positively identify him. Dorothy Palmer, "a Girl about 11 years of age," accused Samuel Smith of raping her in 1681. Smith had actually confessed to the crime before a magistrate, but he was acquitted on "some nice point in Law," the very vagueness of the characterization attesting to its lack of credence with the nonlegal public. We can only guess at the reception these men would have had when they were freed. The infamous Colonel Charteris, convicted of rape in 1730 and pardoned, may offer some insight. Popularly dubbed "Rape-Master General of Great Britain," Charteris elicited great hatred among Londoners. The crowds so disagreed with his pardon that the _Daily Post_ recounts how they "fell upon him and beat him in a barbarous manner" when they spotted him in a Hackney Coach near Chelsea, "for no other Reason than that there were two Women with him in the Coach." At his funeral two years later, Pope described how "the populace . . . rais'd a great riot, almost tore the body out of the coffin, and cast dead dogs &c. into the grave along with it." Although Charteris's high social position certainly added to the popular sentiment against him, people were also outraged at the fact that a known rapist was allowed to walk free.

Certainly, when the courts upheld the fact that male sexual violence had occurred, the guilty men were held in great contempt. William Harding was convicted of raping Sara Bentley, "a Girl of about 7 or 8 years of age," in 1680, and his perversions were widely broadcast. One report described him as "a very debauched fellow, for . . . he was wont to act carnally with his own mother, threatening when she refused to permit his incestuous desires, to fire the house about her Ears." John Price, a.k.a. Ketch, hanged in 1718 for murdering Elizabeth White in the course of a rape, was described as beating her "so cruelly that streams of blood issued from her eyes and mouth . . . forced one of her eyes from the socket, and otherwise so ill treated her, that the language of decency cannot describe it." When eighteenth-century society
acknowledged male sexual violence, they regarded it with the highest contempt.

Judging from a randomly selected five-year period of the *Old Bailey Proceedings*, more than half of the rapes prosecuted were brought by young girls. Although almost none of their rapists were convicted, the high proportion of child rape that was prosecuted has great significance. The age of consent at this time was ten for women and fourteen for men, yet only three of the eight cases involving young victims in all of the rapes between 1714 and 1719 were below age ten; the rest were between ten and fourteen. Clearly, the added burden of proving nonconsent did not deter these girls and their families from prosecuting. Victims had to be cold and calculating; rape was not worth prosecuting unless they felt they had a strong case. The high proportion of young girls among rape prosecutors suggests that social attitudes were more sympathetic to these victims. The courts were not: all of the defendants accused of raping children below ten were acquitted, and convictions for the rest were as low as those for rapes of women over fourteen. Nevertheless, society despised men who had sex with girls of tender years, and these sentiments ensured that more victims from this group came forward to prosecute. Again, social attitudes placed subtle curbs on male sexuality even though the law did not.

The rape acquittals themselves originated more from the harsh penalty that came with a guilty verdict than from a jury’s sense of the defendant’s true innocence. Rape was a serious felony in the law books, and the hangman's rope loomed as a possibility—no matter how distant—over every charge brought to trial. The doctor who examined Elizabeth Banks after her rape warned her that swearing a rape against a man “would take away his Life.” The doctor then “endeavoured to make up the Matter between them.” Many surgeons, midwives, or even JPs, often among the first to hear rape allegations, would have tried to steer women away from a capital prosecution, but nevertheless would have acknowledged the woman’s right to some satisfaction for the wrong done to her. Once a woman went to court, rape’s capital penalty would act against her. Laurie Edelstein described the way in which judges “often emphasized” the severity of the penalty during the trial, to remind juries of the fate awaiting any man found guilty. The fact that women such as Elizabeth Banks persisted in a trial suggests that their motive was as much to publicize the great wrong done to them as to see their attacker hanged. Regardless of the probability of a hostile jury, women clearly had their own reasons for publicly fighting back against their rapists. As Clare Brant has suggested, “[A]n idea of justice can survive its failings in practice,” an idea also echoed by Garthine Walker. The tenacity of such rape prosecutors added to
the terror of those accused, even though capital sentences were rarely given. Men faced the possibility that their conquest might be viewed by the public as sexual violence, if not so viewed by the courts.

As the most serious form of male sexual violence under the law, rape paradoxically freed and constrained men. The death penalty awaiting any man convicted of rape meant that few men were actually ever convicted, but this did not stop women from bringing prosecutions. In a world where “normal” heterosexual sex demanded male aggression, however, it is significant that any men were even accused of rape. In the context of this crime, male sexual violence was more socially defined than legally defined, often meaning the act of a man overpowering a child.

Elite youth violence received particular attention in our period because of the notorious activities of the Mohocks. The Mohocks were a group of aristocratic rakes who “terrorized” the city of London over a period of several months in 1712. The most recent works on the subject have concluded, after thorough research, that the Mohock stories were largely fabrications.47 These violent youths did not really exist, but the terror they caused among Londoners was very real. In a footnote comment, Daniel Statt recognized the potential to view the Mohocks as a moral panic.48 Though peripheral to Statt’s argument, it is central to mine, and I will describe the ways in which society’s fear and sense of victimization led to a very real curb upon upper-class youths.

It is not surprising that Londoners believed the Mohocks’ violence to be real. Queen Anne issued a proclamation, which appeared in a broadside of 17 March, 1711/2. Asking for vigilance and offering a £100 reward to anyone who notified JPs of possible Mohocks, the proclamation alluded to “great and Unusual Riots and Barbarities, which have lately been committed in the night time in the open streets.”49 Another pamphlet offered *A True List of Names of the Mohocks . . . who were Apprehended and Taken on Monday Night, Tuesday and this morning, with more than seventy names—many of titled gentry.*50 The Mohocks were, apparently, real people. They were young men with sufficient resources to be idle—and idle young men had long been a source of disorder in London.51

When even the Queen acknowledged the existence of this mysterious band of rakes, one would imagine that their violence must have escalated to a very serious level indeed. In fact, there is little real evidence of an increase in assaults in 1712. A draft report by legal officials on “the assaults and injuries on Citizens by the Mohocks” recounted several beatings, a riot on a
constable, and an additional fifteen victims whose assailants had not been found. These are not extraordinary numbers in light of the hundreds of assaults by men every year (see table 5.1 in chapter 5). In addition, constables’ searches of their wards for Mohocks or their victims were largely fruitless. Asked to “make diligent inquiry . . . of any . . . persons that have been assaulted beaten wounded bruised maimed or evill intreated by any . . . persons called mohawks, or suspected to be such . . . since the first day of Feb last,” the constables of the various wards filed reports, twenty-two of which are available among the Middlesex Sessions papers. Rather than the seventy arrests and the rash of slashings and riots alluded to in the popular press, nine of the twenty-two ward reports listed no violence of any kind, such as David Edwards, constable of St. James Market ward, who said that “everything was Quiet with his Ward.” The ones that do list violence mainly depict run-of-the-mill incidents: a military officer wounded in a sword fight with another officer, a man and his wife “beaten & bruised” in the early evening, and a vague reference to “one person . . . wounded several places in the Back.”

Awareness of the lack of an unusual expansion in real violence on the streets did percolate into the press. One pamphlet, picking up on the rumors that the Mohocks were part of a Whig plot, referred skeptically to “the mischeif said to be done . . . if true” by the Mohocks. John Gay satirized the press inventions about the Mohocks, promising that his broadside on the connection between the Mohocks and “the Gog and Magog mention’d in the Revelations” would prove “not only the things that are, but also the things that are not.” Even in the eighteenth century, contemporaries expressed misgivings over the tendency of the press to sensationalize or deliberately concoct a story to attract readers. According to one of the pamphleteers, the stories surrounding the Mohocks were written by a “Grub Street Half-penny scribler . . . set at work by an empty Pocket and sharp Stomack.” A poem on the Mohocks recognized that, even if they had been captured, their “growing fame” would “stand untouched.” Jonathan Swift recognized that, though “Grubstreet Papers about them fly like Lightning,” the list printed of those arrested was “all a Lye; and I begin to think there is no Truth or very little in the whole Story.” Historians have since reinforced such conclusions, asserting that the Mohock scare was far more a literary creation than a historical reality. The Mohocks’ contemporaries were skeptical of their real existence, and discussions of the rakes coincided with awareness of the power of the popular press to manufacture stories.

In light of this popular skepticism, the commonly expressed fear of the Mohocks becomes even more interesting. Swift had voiced strong doubts
about their existence, but he nevertheless continued to “forbear walking late. . . . for fear of the Mohocks,” and subsequent entries in his journal mentioned curbing his routine to avoid a Mohock attack, declaring, at the same time, “tho I believe nothing of it.”62 Daniel Defoe, arguably the most likely to doubt the rumors about the Mohocks—being himself painted as their co-conspirator—still treated their danger as genuine and recommended the “Protestant Flail” as the best weapon of defense against them.63 By April of 1712, Budgell admitted in *The Spectator* “that very many begin to doubt whether there were ever any such Society of Men” as the Mohocks, but he still confessed to a persistent belief in the truth of the “great Alarm the whole City has been in.”64 Conspiracy theories abounded, linking the Mohocks with both pro- and antigovernment factions, which served simultaneously to assist the notion that stories of the Mohocks could not be taken at face value and to further foment the terror that the Mohocks represented much more than small-scale rakery.65 The people of London were left unsure of the truth, a lack of certainty that did little to allay their fears, instead making the danger appear far worse.

The Mohock scare was fueled by detailed descriptions of the men and the types of violence they had allegedly perpetrated. Due to the very possibility that these descriptions were invented, they are valuable to historians as evidence of wider social anxieties surrounding certain upper-class youth activities. The *Gentleman’s Library* saw the rake as “a Man always to be pitied . . . for his faults proceed not from choice . . . but from strong Passions and Appetites, which are in Youth too violent for the Curb of Reason, good sense, good Manners, and good Nature,” but most Londoners had a less sympathetic attitude, particularly where the Mohocks were concerned.66 Contemporaries were very aware of the Mohocks’ identity with the aristocracy, and their elite status only made them appear more dangerous.67 Historian Randolph Trumbach argues that aristocratic libertines were largely tolerated by their contemporary society, but the Mohock scare suggests otherwise.68

The 1712 press on the Mohocks invented them as unfettered ruffians who frittered away their excess funds on drinking, whoring, and—the worst fault of all to middling sensibilities—sleeping during the day and carousing all night.69 The drunken Mohocks were in a “constant Toast” to one another’s health, according to one ballad, and a wide variety of popular literature attested to their intemperance.70 Legal officials seem to have internalized this, as few records of prosecutions for drunkenness can be found among those suspected of being Mohocks.71 The Mohocks came out after all decent human beings were safely in their beds, and the official response ordered that the night watch be doubled and that watchmen stay at their posts until six in the
morning to combat this new nocturnal danger. More significantly, the Mohocks were depicted as sexual predators, though the official records of their offenses do not bear this out in reality. Women were attacked at night during this period, but no prosecutions mentioned attempted rape or any other violence of a sexual nature. Despite the lack of real evidence, pamphlets accused the Mohocks of a tendency to “set . . . Women on their Heads, misusing them in a barbarous manner,” and another of “turning up [side-down] . . . of modest Gentlewomen.” (The sexual aspect of such attacks becomes abundantly clear when it is remembered that “drawers or underpants” did not come into vogue for the general female population until the nineteenth century.) Another fictitious treatment remarked that “if [the Mohocks] ravish not our Wives, We have good luck withal,” because the opposite was more often the case. These allegations had no basis in reality, yet the pamphleteers and their eager readers created a danger around idle rich youth that was specifically sexual.

Most important for our purposes, the accounts of slashings and horrible mutilations were also not characteristic of the official record. Of dozens of prosecutions, only five offer descriptions that approach the level of savagery seen in the popular press. Lucy Goddard was said to have been “assaulted” by a man “as she stopped to give him the way, who also held up his caine & swore he would knock out her braines,” but neither Goddard nor any of the other prosecutors in the Commission’s report mention stabbings. A ward constable for St. Anne’s parish reported a man wounded “with a pennknife in four . . . places.” The most grisly accounts are in two informations taken for the Middlesex Quarter Sessions. In one, “two persons like Gentlemen” were said to have “with a violent force thrust a penknife or some other instrumt through the lower part of [Mary Ann Kilby’s] face at some small distance from her lower lip into [her] mouth.” The other described a woman who “was cot shrow [sic] hear lower lip had a blow on the side of her head and had a blow in hear bak” and added that the perpetrators “as they weer going . . . laft mitly and thay aber [appeared] . . . like gentelmen very well drest.” The London Gazette’s request for information on the identity of the Mohocks included an attack on Grace Joyce, who was “much Wounded in her Head and Face,” but she was the only victim other than Mary Ann Kilby listed with slash wounds.

These accounts of real attacks were not nearly as severe as the violence attributed to the Mohocks in the popular press. The penny pamphleteers capitalized on the minority of violent incidents, broadcasting the Mohocks as prone to vile mutilations, especially nose slitting, which is mentioned in almost every literary account. John Gay parodied their exaggerations in a
scene in his play, depicting constables conversing about their encounters with the legendary Mohocks. As one constable averred, “I saw them . . . hook a man . . . cut off his ears, and eat them up,” and another constable said he saw “all the Ground covered with Noses—as thick as ’tis with Hail-stones after a storm.” The press reproduced the few real assaults as a highly distorted picture of serialized violence, and they eagerly grasped at hints of gentry assailants as evidence of the dangerous excesses of rakery. This tendency in the literature attests to its readers’ appetite for negative accounts of elite masculinity.

The Mohocks’ reputation for physical brutality was combined with a complete disregard for social and political mores, turning Londoners’ fear to loathing. As the broadsheet purporting to be their ballad asserted, “[W]e Govern in our Way. . . . / For Crowns and Scepters we decry . . . / ’Gainst Monarchy, we do declare, / in Lucifer’s dread Name.” Another poem satirically referred to the Mohocks as the “Great Reformers, whose exalted souls Despise stiff formal Rules, and Knots of Law.” Mohocks were notorious for attacking watchmen, though almost all of the records of prosecution were for one attack on a single watchman, John Bouch. One broadsheet also considered a popular target of the Mohocks to be “particularly . . . cheif Magistrates.” Much of the literature focused upon their complete lack of human decency, the indiscriminate nature of their attacks, and the fact that their violence was always without provocation. Their actions were described as “Barbarities” perpetrated on “innocent Persons,” and the same broadsheet added, with palpable sarcasm, that “when any Watchmen presumes to demand where they are going, they generally misuse” him. Characterized by a general disregard for rules, both formal and informal, the Mohocks were called “mean and vulgar” and were said to perform “barbarass tricks, without any provocation.” Defoe wondered, with contempt, “what humour it gratifies to murder or wound an unconcerned stranger who has not given the least affront,” and he placed the Mohocks only a slight “degree above the Devil.” Though most Londoners had not directly fallen victim to the Mohocks’ violence, they all considered themselves as potential victims and—more than anything—considered their social values to be in grave peril before the assaults of this nefarious band of rakes.

The public readily believed in the existence of the Mohocks, even with evidence to the contrary, and the ease with which accounts of these lewd violent youths abounded shows that a general distaste for elite male excesses was already prevalent in London society. The Mohock scare simply fed this paranoia and turned it into a moral panic. The concept of a moral panic originated with sociologist Stanley Cohen and has since been used by
nineteenth-century historians with great effectiveness. Essentially, a moral panic occurs when a group is targeted by society as a particular moral danger, usually without just cause, and is starkly and unfairly represented in the press. Eventually, when the flames of moral panic have been fanned into a frenzy, the object of panic is usually curbed by a change in social or legal policy. By perceiving the Mohocks as fearsome and powerful, the public wanted to see them controlled. Though much of the literature on the Mohocks overstated the level and frequency of violence, added lewd acts where none were actually prosecuted, and projected the arrest of a few aristocrats onto an elite culture, the exaggerations met with a credulous audience.

The moral panic was felt by all layers of society, and Londoners responded en masse with a desire to curb the notorious excesses of elite youth. Defoe wished that “the gallows, the army, or the navy would . . . soon rid us of such a set of bloodhounds.” Lady Wentworth was even more disgusted, averring that “instead of setting fifty pound upon the head of a highwayman, . . . they would doe much better to sett a hundred upon the . . . heads” of the Mohocks. More sympathetic, though no less critical, the Spectator believed a substantial proportion of the Mohocks to be “some thoughtless youngsters” who “out of . . . an immoderate fondness to be distinguished for Fellows of Fire, are insensibly hurried into this senseless scandalous Project” and must “stand corrected by . . . Reproofs.” The violence in the Mohock stories coincided with a growing distaste for the practice of dueling, and the other aspects of libertinism—lewd behavior and disrespect for authority—were also receiving increased attention from the middling sorts. The moral panic created by the Mohock scare thus represents the power of a brief event to align popular opinion in condemnation of genteel male excesses.

This power is most visible in subsequent prosecutions of elite men. The data from the assault recognizances for Westminster suggest that the Mohock scare did cause Londoners to consider upper-class men more dangerous than they had before. In the four years following the stories about Mohock violence, the number of upper-class men bound over for assault rose from approximately twenty per year in the preceding four years to about thirty-eight per year from 1712 to 1715. This increase was not due solely to the sudden influx of prosecutions at the time of the scare itself either, as the proportion of gentlemen prosecuted was higher in eight of the fourteen subsequent sessions. Recognizances are the most reliable measure of this phenomenon, as Robert Shoemaker has found their information on the identity and location of the defendants (which includes their occupation or status) to be more accurate than indictments. Fluctuations in numbers of prosecutions, of course, are not a window into true levels of violence, but legal
records can at least reveal popular attitudes toward crime. Though the numbers of recognizances binding gentry are small, we can see in these few prosecutions a much wider aversion to certain aspects of elite male behavior. The informal policing, in other words, was likely even greater than the formal policing of genteel masculinity constituted by the growth in recognizances. Whether gentlemen were genuinely becoming more violent or not, the rise in prosecutions indicates that they were more often perceived as a danger.

England had been treated to stories of youth gangs in previous generations, and the organized rake violence of the Mohocks was not the first of its kind to find its way into the popular press or the courts. Neil Guthrie opened his article on the Mohocks by citing references to “the heyday of the Roaring Boys in the reign of Elizabeth I” and “the ancient Mohocks” from the time of King Charles. An account in the OBP described “one Mr. Gerard, Nephew . . . to My Lord Gerard,” along with a group of “several other young Gentlemen,” becoming frustrated when they found a victualling-house closed late at night. According to the victualler, “[T]hey knocked hard at the door, and bid him open it, the which he refusing, one or more of them began to break the windows, and . . . [then] they threw up lighted Links,” setting a small fire in an upstairs room. This account appeared in 1695, more than a decade before the Mohocks, and is another example of the existence of rakery prior to the events of 1712.

Generally, the attitudes toward earlier rakes tended to be fairly indulgent, in stark contrast to the moral panic surrounding the Mohocks. Anna Bryson discerned a dramatic decline in public toleration of libertinism, especially in the decades following the restoration. Even though there was elite violence before 1712, she argued, the “Murderous Mohock outrages against Londoners” constituted a “peak” in rake violence, which provoked a greater public response. The “gallant libertine figure” which had emerged by the early eighteenth century was, according to Bryson “radically uncivil in a way unknown” to previous generations. This notion also coincided with the intensive campaigns of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, which had been operating in the capital since the 1690s. These societies, which targeted typical rake behavior such as drinking and whoring, among other things, also emerged as a response to the perceived depravity of the restoration. The Mohock scare occurred when the reforming zeal was still very strong, before it had begun its steady decline to disappearance in the 1730s. The Mohocks can thus be seen as the source of a moral panic, drawing public animosity and fear in a way never before elicited by rake excesses.

The moral panic seems to have been effective in increasing public prosecution for years afterward. In the decade following the explosion of press on
the Mohocks, there was a perceptible increase in the prosecution of similar forms of rakery. The assault recognizances exhibit the persistence, in the public mind, of the key characteristics of the Mohock stories. David Bowen had John Bentley, a “gentleman,” bound “for saying whenever he met him he would cut his Nose off” two years after the Mohock scare.104 Victims went before sympathetic law officials with tales of gentlemen assaulting and “affronting them in the street.”105 The account of a gentleman bound over for assaulting a woman adds sufficient description to leave little doubt of his reputation for rakery. Said to be “a person of an infamous character and a common disturber of the peace,” he was also accused of “assaulting the Drawers of the Vine Tavern at Charing cross and bilking the house of the Reckoning and . . . swearing he would Kill Englishmen, Frenchmen, and germans saying he was sorry his sword was not sharp enough to kill all the Rogues in Charing Cross.”106 Similar aggression was present in the recognizance for Daniel Langthorne, another gentleman, said to have been “a nightly Common disturber” of Elizabeth Gray, “at her door and windowes . . . swearing, cursing and threatening her in most sad prophone words, for putting her in great terror and fear . . . & for threatening to cane her & much more.”107 Elite males had a reputation for behaving aggressively, and for flouting the law as well as the rules of common decency, and they may have actually been more limited as a result. In other words, when London society considered itself a victim of the Mohocks in 1712, they reacted by prosecuting more genteel youth than they had before.

This chapter reveals a very significant, though often imperceptible, victim of male petty violence in early-eighteenth-century London: the general public. Society as a whole had a key role to play in curbing male violence. We have seen the press at work interpreting the legitimacy or illegitimacy of rape acquittals, and more prominently in churning out grisly accounts of Mohock atrocities. These pamphlets both responded to and fueled a public paranoia that already existed about the dangers of certain forms of male aggression and the need to keep them in check. Individual prosecutors of men’s assaults served a similar role to the press, on a smaller scale. Their prosecutions gained power and significance when they reflected forms of masculine petty violence considered particularly repugnant by society as a whole. The courts, too, were part of this society and punished certain male assaults more harshly than others.

Sexual assault prosecutors understood the courts’ discriminatory nature and strategized by going before a JP and asking for a recognizance against their
attackers. Male and female victims of masculine sexual aggression found satisfaction (though slight) for the wrongs done them by accusing men of attempted rape, sodomy, or fathering a bastard. Though lesser offenses, they often subjected those accused to more constraints than they faced when on trial for rape at the Old Bailey. Even the latter, however, experienced a certain amount of policing. Young girls and elderly women brought rape charges to court more than other women. This suggests the existence of an unwritten societal attitude that defined male sexual conquest as violence when it was directed against women of extreme age or youth. The courts and society felt that the death penalty was too severe for rape, but they found other ways to condemn and punish male sexual violence.

Even surrounded by skepticism of the truth of their existence, the Mohocks evoked very real fear in their contemporaries, indicating that the public was ready to condemn rakery and see it punished. The press took the tenuous connection between genteel attackers and a relatively minor spate of assaults and transformed them into a very marketable narrative, ridden with hints of conspiracy. The Mohock scare escalated into a moral panic. In subsequent years prosecutors of elite male violence were able to draw strength from the memory of 1712, and more men and women came forward with complaints of this type of youth violence than they had previously.

Moral panic, along with rape and sexual assault prosecutions, reveals the diverse and subtle ways in which eighteenth-century male aggression was confined within legal and ideological boundaries.