The Female Crime: Gender, Class and Female Criminality in Victorian Representations of Poisoning

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Abstract

The Victorian nineteenth century was awash with crime, murder, and violence. Not least, the 'feminine' art of poisoning. This was a 'clean' method of murder that might conveniently rid oneself of an unhappy marriage or a love rival. Whilst poisoning cases framed interesting and salacious fiction, the conception of poisoning as a woman's crime relates to deeper stereotypes in Victorian society. Gender and class norms weighed heavily, and poisoning was configured as an essentially feminine crime. This article examines, via several Old Bailey cases, the factors responsible for the supposed link between women, poisoning, and predisposed gender and class ideals. I also consider the role that the nineteenth-century press played in establishing poisoning as a woman's crime. The history of poisoning has been little considered due to the lack of archival material on poisoning cases. This study intends to expand the study of gender and crime in nineteenth-century Victorian Britain.

Key Words: Victorian, poisoning, murder, gender, class, trials, crime

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In nineteenth-century Britain, poisoning was a sensationalised crime, often in the public eye. No case better highlights the embedded Victorian middle-class fear of the secret female poisoner than that of Christiana Edmunds in 1872. Edmunds poisoned boxes of chocolates and other sweets as part of a plot to target her love interest's wife. Her case demonstrates how poisoning was represented in the press as a female crime. During her trial it was noted that crowds of well-dressed women came to sit in the gallery of the Old Bailey. They were described as 'enthralled' by the defendant, with audience numbers increasing at every session.[1] It was feared that these women were flocking to hear and learn how Edmunds conducted her crime, later meeting in groups to share the recipes and tactics she used.[2] It is interesting that this perspective existed. After all, the evidence is clear that poisoning, while popular with women, was not a uniquely female crime. For example, William Palmer, a doctor, was sentenced to hang after he poisoned his friend John Cook with strychnine in 1855.[3] [4] Furthermore, women also committed murder through means considered more 'masculine'. Eliza Gibbons murdered her husband in 1857 by shooting him in the head,[5] and Jane Colbert was imprisoned for murdering her husband by throwing a knife at him and piercing his lung in retaliation to domestic abuse in 1854.[6] However, poisoning was closely linked with female murderers in the Victorian press, which, as this article will demonstrate, was particularly related to sensationalist journalism.

This article examines the factors that drove women to kill their husbands, in the context of several poisoning cases tried at the Old Bailey, London. Providing a general history of poisoning cases in Victorian England, it will examine the types of poison used; how methods of detection changed; legislative changes; and will consider the public perception of such crimes. It will argue that the gender ideologies of the period helped to define poisoning as a female crime. Using several cases of husband murder this article will discuss the media representation of such crimes; why women might have chosen poison as their preferred method; and how gender ideals and social expectations were presented in court. This paper also considers how women in turn utilised the press' sensationalist image of the female poisoner, in retaliation against male violence.

Studying the testimony and evidence given in the trials of nineteenth-century crimes can tell us much about society in Victorian Britain.[7] This article draws on five trials from the Old Bailey online archive, dated between 1842 and 1886, all of which were for cases of mariticide by poisoning. The cases include those of Jane Bowler, who was tried in 1842. Jane was a working-class woman accused of murdering her husband, Joseph Bowler, with arsenic. She was found not guilty. Ann Merritt was a working-class woman who, in 1850, was accused of murdering her husband, James Merritt, with arsenic. She was convicted and sentenced to death. Ann always asserted that she was innocent, and even in her final statement before the magistrate she reiterated that she originally bought the arsenic for herself. She claimed to have intended to commit suicide because of her husband's recent drunken behaviour, but she changed her mind. She believed her husband must have taken it in place of the acids and sodas he had in the morning: whether accidentally or not she did not disclose. . Finally, Adelaide Bartlett was a lower-middle-class woman who was accused of murdering her husband, Thomas Edwin Bartlett, by poisoning him with chloroform in 1886. George Dyson, the man who purchased the chloroform for her, and who was also her love interest, was acquitted before trial. Adelaide was ultimately found not guilty.[8]

Whilst these sources give an insight into what the court deemed to be relevant information, one of the main issues with the Old Bailey trial reports is that they only show the witness testimony, and nothing from the lawyers, judge, or jury in the courtroom. Defendant statements are frequently missing from the testimony. In some cases, for example where multiple doctors were questioned, the accounts are often highly repetitive in nature. It is also important to note that some words had different meanings in the nineteenth century and so need to be read from a nineteenth-century perspective. Other primary source material drawn upon in this paper includes press reports and cartoons, either directly associated with these trials or of a related nature. The press reports add context to the trial reports, and they can fill in the gaps in the testimonies by exemplifying the popular attitudes and opinions of Victorian society, particularly on the subjects of class and gender. These reports, too, should be read with caution. The views of the editor, journalist, or audience could influence reporting, as could the geographical location of the paper. However, the five case studies that are the focus of this paper only offer a snapshot of cases of women killing by poisoning. Reconstructing the context and social concerns surrounding female crime more generally is, therefore, essential in order to interrogate the network of ideologies surrounding women's alleged use of poison in murder cases, and the sensationalism that characterised the reporting of these crimes.

Gender, class, and women's crimes

In the nineteenth century, women were legally classed as secondary citizens and were discouraged from gaining a formal education or a career and were unable to own property or vote.[9] Despite, in reality, very many women demonstrating agency and activities well beyond the domestic realm, the middle-class ideology of 'separate spheres' dictated, in theory, that a woman's place was attending to the private sphere of home and family life as 'the angel of the house'. This worldview came to transcend class boundaries to a great extent: the industrialisation of the workforce brought gender issues to the forefront of labour disputes, as working-class men competed against lower-paid women who they sought to relegate to the home in consequence. Moreover, middle-class philanthropic practices such as that of district visiting saw middle-class women taking domestic ideology into lower-class homes. As a result, for much of the nineteenth-century, women across society were expected to conform to these gendered, domestic roles. However, this ideology of 'separate spheres' was a pervasive discourse that was not always reflected in lived experiences.[10] Most lower-class women, and some middle-class women, had to work to survive. These working lifestyles did not conform to popular standards of feminine behaviour, and put women into the public sphere ideologically reserved for men. We see, here, the intersection of class and gender. Although working-class, (and, in reality, some middle-class) women had to work beyond the domestic sphere, for practical reasons, their transgression of gender ideals was used to show why middle-class women and, thus, the middle classes generally, were 'superior', justifying their societal cultural, moral, and political authority.[11]

Cases involving a sexual aspect, such as adultery or the murder of a lover or a rival were seen as didactic, warning of the 'dangers' associated with out-of-control female expressions of sexuality, to individual victims but also to stable society. Not only was it considered that such women's divergence from the feminine ideal was a factor in their crimes, but they acted as examples of just why a woman's place was at home, under the control and supervision of a husband, father, or brother, for their own and societies benefit. Furthermore, an essential aspect of middle class discourse was their 'superiority' over the working classes, whose women were more likely to have to work outside of the home, again diverging from expected female norms of behaviour. Court proceedings, press coverage and public interest in women's crimes thus reflected and reinforced norms of gender and class. Such cases also reveal the contradictory nature of such discourses, as the press and public revelled in the fantasies of exoticized sexual revelation.

Poisoning in Victorian Britain

Eliza Fenning was sentenced to death for poisoning in 1815, although none of her victims died as a result of her actions. Fenning attempted to murder her employers by poisoning their food with arsenic, after she was disciplined by the lady of the house for visiting the rooms of young male workers in the house whilst semi-dressed.[12] Fenning provided four statements of good character at her trial, and there was doubt of her guilt, yet she, nevertheless, received the death penalty and was later executed at Newgate prison. It was hoped that harsh punishments would act as a deterrent, amongst fears that cases of poisoning were on the rise. John Marshall, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, published a pamphlet in 1815 describing five cases of recovery from arsenic poisoning. In this pamphlet he detailed why he thought Fenning was guilty, claiming to have witnessed Fenning double over in pain after eating some of the dumplings she had cooked in what he believed to be an attempt to divert suspicion away from herself.[13] He followed this with a piece in *The Times*, describing her as 'one of the perpetrators of this dreadfully alarming and daily increasing evil'.[14] Marshall's accounts reflected popular concerns about the increasing number of poisoning cases and the role of women such as Fenning in this surge of cases.

During the trial of Ann Merritt, who was tried and sentenced to death in 1850 for murdering her husband, the judge remarked on 'the strange and horrible frequency of the crime which you are charged'.[15] As public concerns over poisoning grew, press reports of these crimes increased in number, reaching almost hysterical heights by the middle of the nineteenth century.[16] The rise in sensationalist reporting, and the fear that even more cases were going unreported, drew attention from both the medical and legal professions.[17] For example, the 1851 Arsenic Regulation Act prohibited shopkeepers from selling arsenic and other poisons to people they did not know. Buyers were required to sign a register with their name and the purpose for the poison. The regulation further meant that arsenic, typically a white powder, had to be mixed with either soot or indigo. This was because arsenic has a bitter taste and mixing with food or drink seemed to be a common way to hide this bitterness and administer the poison to victims.[18] By mixing it with soot or indigo, it would stand out in food and drink, reducing the likelihood that it would go undetected. The principles of this act worked on paper; however, the act relied on shopkeepers keeping well-documented ledgers, not destroying or altering their records, or selling poison illicitly. In Christiana Edmunds's case, for example, it was discovered that the shopkeeper who had supplied the poison had pages missing from his record book.[19] Furthermore, whilst the legislation might have restricted anonymous sales, it did not help if the chemist knew the purchaser. In the case of Ann Merritt, for example, the chemist she obtained the arsenic from had sold the poison to her before, so did not feel it necessary to ask questions as prescribed by law, again showing the discrepancies between theory and practice.[20]

Legal professionals again tried to intervene five years after the Arsenic Regulation Act was introduced. In 1856 Betsy McMullen was tried for poisoning and murdering her husband. The presiding judge argued that women should be banned from buying any potentially lethal drugs and that those selling them should be convicted of manslaughter in the event of them being used to cause harm.[21] Banning women from purchasing poisons would, in reality, have been practically difficult as common poisons such as arsenic, chloroform, and strychnine had many domestic uses as cleaning aids or medicines. Oddly, the focus of legislation and detection in this era focused specifically on arsenic. Although widely used, many of the trials, such as some of those considered in this article, related to other poisons. This special focus on arsenic was perhaps due to its particularly vicious effects and bitter, unpleasant taste. Contemporaries also remarked upon this focus on arsenic, to the exclusion of other poisons. A letter written to *Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser* on 23 March 1850, signed only by 'An Englishman', for example, questioned why arsenic was subjected to stricter controls compared to other poisons available, many of which were subtler in nature. The writer argued that, because these other poisons were used in medicine rather than domestically, the other poisons were protected from legislation.[22] This letter was dated a year before the Arsenic Regulation Act was passed in 1851 and it is probable that the author, like the judge in Betsy McMullen's trial, would not have been impressed at the limited extent of this legislation.

Ironically, a case brought against a male poisoner promoted legislation to protect defendants. When William Palmer was deemed not have been afforded a fair trial in Staffordshire due to sensational and widespread newspaper representation that caused public prejudice against him, the Palmer Act of 1856 was enacted.[23] This Act enabled hearings from outside of the London area to be moved to the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey, to ensure fair trials for the accused.[24] Palmer's case also indicates the influence that sensationalist journalism had over public opinion and that high profile poisoning cases had on the British legal system in the mid nineteenth century.

New methods of detection

One of the key challenges for contemporaries was determining poison as the cause of death. Other difficulties were discovering the exact substance, who administered it, and how. Testing for arsenic poisoning was developed during the early 1800s: until then there was not a test conclusive enough to differentiate between a stomach condition or an illness and a case of poisoning. This difficulty formed a point of contention that can be seen in the extensive trial transcript of Adelaide Bartlett, which discusses, across almost sixty pages, how chloroform could have gotten into the stomach of her alleged victim without any burns in the throat or mouth.[25]

During the middle of the century much changed. The 1840s bore witness to developments in both medicine and policing which had several key effects on the detection of poisoning crimes. First, rural English communities developed police and detective forces which investigated crimes that might have otherwise been abandoned and neglected.[26] At around the same time, medical professionals focused on the problem of detection, quickly leading to the development of a more conclusive and sensitive test for arsenic poisoning, commonly known as the Marsh Test.[27] Created by chemist James Marsh in 1836, it was found specifically useful in the area of forensic toxicology.[28] The result of better testing and wider investigation was a rise in documented cases and increased media coverage. However, Ann Merrit's case highlights the continued difficulty of proving murder involving poison, mainly as it was almost impossible to determine who administered the poison to the victim. Ann Merritt was handed a death penalty based on a statement by Dr Henry Letherby, a 'seasoned and educated toxicologist', resulting in uproar from the public, and medical and legal professionals alike.[29] His statement implied that the average man's stomach takes around five hours to digest food and pass into the bowel, creating a timeline that incriminated Ann Merritt.[30] R. E. Davies, of the Royal College of Surgeons, wrote a letter to the *London Daily News* in which he questioned Letherby's statement. Merritt's husband was an alcoholic and Davies presented a theory that food digests slower in a drunken man's stomach. He argued that because of Letherby's statement the jury in Merrit's trial could not entertain a theory that the victim may have taken his own life, as in the time frame given it would have been virtually impossible.[31] Merritt was eventually pardoned following the outcry. An article in the *Hereford Times,* on 30 March 1850, explained that 'our readers of whatever sex or party will rejoice to [know] that the efforts which have been made to save the life of Ann Merritt have been attended with success'.[32] Communication was made between the Home Secretary and the Governor of Newgate, 'the execution of this unhappy woman would be respited during her Majesty's pleasure', meaning she had been detained in an asylum after being declared insane.[33] Martin Weiner observes that in the second half of the century there was a decline in prosecutions of women for serious crimes, and a larger decline in convictions and length of prison sentences.[34] The number of women executed reduced dramatically, whilst insanity verdicts for women nearly doubled. Weiner argues that the reason for this increase is that whereas Victorian juries would consider male criminals to be 'bad', it was becoming easier to explain female "deviants" who committed heinous crimes as 'mad'.[35]

Press coverage

The public interest in cases of female poisoners is demonstrated by the large crowds at the trials of both Christina Edmunds and Adelaide Bartlett. In the latter case the courtroom was so crowded that one of the main doors was completely blocked.[36] There were crowds of spectators inside and outside of the courtroom. Even the apartments surrounding the Old Bailey had a considerable number of spectators watching the building.[37] The press both reflected and fed such interest, through sensationalist journalism which fed social and moral fears of poisoning and poisoners, suggesting a threat to society more broadly.[38]

One concern was the secretive nature of the crime. George Robb argues that known poisonings were believed to be the tip of the iceberg and that for every case that was discovered dozens probably went undiscovered.[39] It does seem that the fear of unknown cases of murder caused some disquiet among a public concerned that wives were regularly killing their husbands, without detection.[40] On 16 December 1882, *The Times* remarked:

'from the numerous poisonings which have only been detected by an accident or an afterthought, the inference is only reasonable that there remains a margin of poisonings which are never detected at all.[41]'

The obsessive coverage of poisonings in Britain played a slightly contradictory role. By publishing details of poisonings, the press potentially created the very problem they claimed to be concerned about, by providing details which might facilitate further poisonings.[42]

Sensationalist imagery also painted a misleading picture of poisoning as a crime conducted under the darkness of night. This sort of media representation was at best selective, and, at worst, inaccurate because poisonings also happened during daylight. An example of such sensationalist imagery appeared on the front page of the *Illustrated Police News* on 8 June 1889. It depicts the case of Florence Maybrick, accused of poisoning her husband, James, a wealthy Liverpudlian cotton merchant, by switching his medicine whilst he slept in his bed next to her.[43][44] The newspaper depicts multiple scenes from the crime she was accused of, including a maid finding the fly papers which Maybrick is said to have soaked to extract the arsenic, and a scene of her in prison after her arrest.[45]

It is interesting to note that the prison scene is the only one in which she is depicted showing any form of emotion. During the crime Maybrick is depicted as passionless and rather malevolent, but once she is in jail she holds her head in her hands, perhaps inferring guilt and regret. While this could be an indication of remorse, the overall depiction suggests that she is perhaps just grieved at being caught. Either way, the images imply guilt and she was indeed found guilty.[46] A similar image appeared on the front page of *Reynolds's Miscellany* on 10 July 1858. Here, a woman named Joanna is shown preparing poison near a sleeping Sir John Cleveland. She is looking over her shoulder to ensure he is still sleeping and thus not aware of her actions. Meanwhile another man, who we can only assume was Joanna's accomplice or perhaps her lover, looks on in the background.[47] She is depicted as protected under the cover of night, while Cleveland slept 'safely' in his bed, unaware that someone was attempting to murder him.[48] According to Lucy Williams, these women conformed to the 'very middle-class fears of the sneaking female poisoner'.[49] Again, such representations both reflected and reinforced public fears and opinion in this period, and ultimately led to female poisoners being compared to witches and being labelled monstrous.[50] These ideas were not unique to the nineteenth century, and there is evidence of poisoning being linked to women and the comparison to witches, as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[51] The context of nineteenth century gender and class relations provided a framework in which that connection could be made more explicit, and more threatening. This was a useful discourse for journalists during a period of substantial expansion of the popular press. As we have seen, this combination of pre-existing public prejudices, fears and concerns, and the press coverage which reflected and fed them, influenced legislative, social, and medical perspectives on poisoning throughout the nineteenth century.

Poisoning and gender

Popular perspectives on women and gender in this period drove a view that poisoning was a largely female crime. Both men and women used poison to injure, incapacitate, and kill, however the Victorian press particularly portrayed poisoning as a female crime. Portrayed as a subversive crime, requiring no physical strength, female poisoners fed societal views of women as naturally passive but potentially dangerous and insidious when influenced by their emotions, particularly of a sexual nature. Such ideas supported and reflected a discourse of stable society requiring women to be under the supervision of men.

The idea that poisoning was a secretive crime is seen in trial judgements and contemporary press reports. In the Bartlett case, for example, the judge commented that 'poisonings were not like crimes of sudden passion. They were necessarily mysterious and hidden in their operation'.[52] But this representation was not just about the subversive nature of poisoning. The nineteenth century, as many periods in history, considered men physically stronger and more violent than women. Judith Knelman and Martin Weiner have discussed how male crime was, therefore, expected to be more violent and on the spur of the moment in comparison to female crime, which was less physical due to women's physical weakness.[53] Press representation promulgated this distinction. For example, in both the Maybrick and Cleveland illustrations, the victims were shown to be physically incapacitated, either by illness or simply because they were asleep, whilst the poison was administered. The female poisoner thus committed her crime in a non-violent manner.

This argument that the lack of physical force required in a case of poisoning meant the act could be attributed to women has another dimension. Knelman suggests that poisoning presented a practical, but immoral and illegal, response to the oppression of women. Or, in other words, a non-physical response to the physical violence of male partners.[54] Knelman believes any hostility and violence in a relationship comes out of a man's attempt to control the woman and the woman's attempt to exert her own independence and agency.[55] However, unlike an overzealous beating, poisoning could not be considered an accident because there is an element of premeditation in all poisoning cases; one had to go and acquire the poison, as well as determine how to administer it. [56] It is therefore unlikely that someone killed another by poisoning in a jealous fit of rage.

Mary Hartman argues another reason for poisoning to be considered a threat in nineteenth-century Britain, is that women who killed men represented a threat to social norms of gender. She goes on to explain that if these women were also middle- or upper-class, the worry was that they would tip the scale of social class normativity, leading to potential social non-conformity.[57] In his letter to the *London Daily News* in 1850, R.E. Davies commented on expectations of women in this era: 'Lately few women have humiliated their sex by the perpetration of heinous offences. The natural attributes of Women are kindness, virtue and affection'.[58]

Davies was writing in defence of Ann Merritt and argued that women did not poison as widely as the press suggested. But his perspective shows that, in this era, women were not expected to be a threat to men. Lucy Williams has considered how female crime lay outside of the normal social expectations of their gender. Women were considered caring, kind, and calm, whereas male crime fitted within the social bounds of masculinity. However, Williams explains that, for women, murder was 'doubly deviant', denoting a significant departure from femininity.[59] Robb argues that 'a woman's ideal gender role was to "love, honour and obey"', not maim, injure and murder.[60] Unlike Weiner and Knelman, Hartman focuses on class rather than gender, stating that middle class women were literally getting away with murder.[61] One reason for this could have been that the middle classes had access to knowledge of poisons through domestic handbooks on medicine and drugs.[62] Robb expands on this argument, stating that middle-class women committing murder by poison was particularly troubling because their outward behaviours and appearance did not indicate any criminal nature. However, working-class women were almost expected to have a criminal side. Represented as 'rough' and 'degenerate', murder was just seen as another aspect of their depraved working-class lifestyle.[63] Anger and physicality were considered masculine traits and had no place in the home or around family.[64] Women were expected to dedicate themselves to the private sphere, running the home and family; while the men would go out in to the public sphere to work, earn money, and socialise. I would argue that men and women had to look and act in a certain way to remain adequately masculine or feminine. Those that did not fit into the boundaries of gender set out by Victorian society had to be 'understood' within a pre-existing framework of society. To challenge the idea that women were essentially passive and non-violent, or that men were just as likely as women to use poisoning to commit harm, was to challenge the very intersection of class and gender on which the middle classes predicated their social, cultural and political authority.

Due to the divisive intersection of class and gendered ideology that underpinned them, female offenders were judged by these standards, rather than the facts of the case, by both the court and press. Often, they were also judged in medical and psychiatric terms. Female murderers of the Victorian era were almost never presented as the women they were, whether excused or vilified. Instead they were judged on their status as 'good women' and the 'social rules' they had broken.*[65]* Hence a woman's reputation played a role in the court, the jury's view of them, and how their sentence was decided.[66] Lucy Williams and Judith Knelman both agree that the masculinity or femininity of an offender was commented on by the papers and that their personal character was also a factor of judgement.[67] Robb uses the example of Mary Ann Geering in his article. Geering was described as 'a woman of masculine and forbidding appearance' in a *Times* newspaper article representing her trial.[68] It could be argued that these women's greatest crimes were going against their prescribed social roles.

The trial transcripts of Merritt, Bartlett, and Bowler, also devote significant attention to a discussion of the character traits of both the victim and the accused. In the Bowler case, the victim was described as gloomy and disconsolate, and it was documented that he tried to kill himself on two separate occasions. A friend of Bowler's, Henry Clarke, told the court that he had to stop Joseph jumping into the canal, for example. On the other hand, Jane Bowler was depicted as a good mother and wife, and therefore considered of good character. This may have swayed the jury and contributed to her ultimately being found innocent..[69] Although drunkenness was not discussed in the Bowler trial (it was only hinted at), alcohol abuse was a common theme in nineteenth-century trial reports. During the Merritt trial the victim was identified as a heavy drinker, a fact which grieved his wife. Francis Toulman, a surgeon and acquaintance of the Merritts, specifically commented that Ann attended to her husband judiciously, indicating that she adhered to the ideological expectations of a Victorian wife.[70] Other witnesses said that she was devoted to her husband and her grief after her husband's death, if genuine, was described as overwhelming.[71] Whilst it did not sway the jury at the time, in contrast to the case of Jane Bowler, it had an effect on public opinion, eventually leading to Ann Merrit's release. During her trial, Adelaide Bartlett seemed outright offended at the suggestion she could not adequately care for her husband, showing that she took her role as nurturer very seriously.[72] Of all the trials this article addresses, Bartlett's is the lengthiest and the most unusual in terms of the character of the accused and victim. The Bartlett's had a platonic marriage, their relationship one of brother and sister more than husband and wife. Edwin Bartlett, Adelaide's father-in-law, insinuated at her trial that Adelaide and her husband had a sexual relationship in the beginning, noting that they shared a bed and that she had been pregnant once before which resulted in a stillborn child. While Edwin had no reason to believe the relationship was nothing short of marital normality, later in the trial he describes them as no longer having an intimate relationship.[73] The attention to detail given in the Bartlett trial to their relationship highlights the significance that the legal system, at least, attributed to this area in poisoning cases, again underlining the centrality of gender normativity to such cases.[74]

Whilst the media often focused only on the female offender, their character, personal circumstances, and physical attributes, the trials would look at both the victim and accused. Negative revelations about the personalities of the victim could help sway the court and jury in favour of the accused. Weiner believes that juries often looked with sympathy on women when their crimes were retaliatory.[75] However, Knelman discusses the case of Elizabeth Martha Brown which was given significant coverage in a broadsheet newspaper in 1856. However, there was no mention of the character of her victim, a violent and abusive husband, anywhere in the newspaper reports. In fact, she was regarded as a 'wretched criminal' murdering 'poor Anthony Brown'.[76] This language also indicates that perceptions drawn upon in press reports about the victim's character might be used by the wider public as a way to judge whether the crime could be morally explained or not, in terms of the popular ideologies surrounding gender roles. In portraying the victim as a good man, reporters consequently portrayed Elizabeth as a cruel and wretched murderer who had no reason to commit her crime. In contrast, Lisa Appignanesi refers to the case of Louise Hartley, an eighteen-year-old who attempted to murder her father. The defence condemned the victim for his 'unfatherly behaviour' and displayed him as being 'vindictive and a brute'.[77] Appignanesi argues that such press coverage was influential on public opinion and, ultimately, on the jury who acquitted the accused.[78] Unlike Elizabeth, Louise's crimes were excusable because of the ways in which the character of her victim were portrayed.

One area that garnered significant attention in both the trial and press was a woman's sexual agency, which was considered as evidence of a deviant nature. This is shown in the trial of Florence Maybrick, whose adulterous affair with her husband's friend was used as evidence against her in court. However, her husband's numerous infidelities were never mentioned, deemed irrelevant by the Victorian sexual double standard.[79] [80] Likewise, during Jane Bowler's trial, focus was given to her interest in Jon Dunster, a lodger who lived in her house. This interest called into question her 'loyalty' to her husband, despite her otherwise appearing to be a 'dutiful' wife.[81] The Bartlett case presents sexual license, or lack of, as a motivation for the crime. Edwin, the victim, had married Adelaide on the promise of a largely platonic relationship. According to witnesses, he even went so far as to encourage Adelaide to receive male attention and Dyson, the co-conspirator, explained how Adelaide had been 'given' to him by her husband.[82] During the trial it emerged that Edwin had begun to change his mind about the platonic nature of his marriage.[83] The press seized on this information, with *The Times* creating a motive for Adelaide to administer chloroform to her husband: to prevent his sexual advances.[84]

Some women exploited the reputation that poisoning had as 'the female crime' to gain power over men. A salient example of this form of intimidation was women's response to male violence in the period following the 1888 "Jack the Ripper" murders. Men would threaten to 'whitechapel' their wives; women, in return, threatened to 'white powder' their husbands.[85] A woman's threat to poison her husband was both equivalent to, and a response to, a man's threat of physical violence, aggression, or intimidation in a relationship.[86] Sarah Brice, for example, threatened to poison her husband after he was accused of robbery due to the bad company he kept.[87] Although these threats were not seen through, they were used as a form of intimidation against men.[88]

Another interesting example of this occurred in 1856, when Betsy McMullen was accused of murdering her husband in Bolton by putting tartarised antimony in his tea. Her supposed motive was to claim insurance money. An investigation revealed that it was common practice for women to give their drunken husbands antimony which caused vomiting and extreme physical weakness. Locally this practice was referred to as 'quietness'.[89] *The Times* commented on the poisonings, stating that there were three customary evils in Bolton: that women were poisoning their husbands while they were incapacitated and drunk, that they did this without the husband's knowledge, and that husbands became 'wretchedly' drunk.[90] It is interesting that the writer made the link between the evils of the husband and that of the wife, and seemed to be suggesting that the men and their actions were as culpable as the women.

Despite the salacious press and public hysteria, Martin Weiner notes some public and court sympathy towards 'wronged women' in this period, at least toward the end of the nineteenth century.[91] In certain cases a woman's personal circumstances might be used in her defence or as grounds for reprieve. An example of this can be seen in the case of Charlotte Harris. Harris was convicted and sentenced to hang for deliberately poisoning her husband over a week so that she could marry her wealthy lover. However, she was later found to be pregnant.[92] Public interest in this case built, and letters were even sent to Queen Victoria pleading for her release. Her sentence was eventually commuted to transportation to the colonies and from then on no pregnant women or new mothers were hanged in Britain.. [93][94] When Ann Merritt was sentenced to death, even after the jury recommended to the court due to accounts of her good character, her case generated public outcry.[95] *The Times* was clear in indicating that this sympathy was from both men and women, and that both campaigned equally. Not necessarily for Merritt's release, but for at least a commutation her death sentence. These campaigns were successful and her sentence was reduced to incarceration in an asylum.[96]

There was, though, no guarantee of clemency. Mary Ball was hanged after being convicted of her husband's murder by poisoning. Although the jury recommended mercy, the judge, Lord Coleridge, pressured them into withdrawing their recommendation.[97] Murders committed in the 'heat of the moment' were also shown limited mercy. Many were shown to be forms of self-defence or in retaliation to any wrongdoing towards them. As poisoning was predominantly premeditated, this defence was not available to these women. [98]

Conclusion

Cases of female poisoners offers a fascinating and instructive window through which we can view the intersection of class and gender norms in nineteenth century British society. Also, the growing influence of the popular press on public opinion and legislative change.

The very fact that female murderers existed challenged the ideals of femininity that justified supposed national and middle-class cultural, political, and moral 'superiority'. The middle-class 'domestic angel' was at the heart Britain's concept of itself as a stable and constitutional nation at home, authorised to bring such civilisational benefits to the benighted and backward peoples of their empire far away. To 'explain' the contradiction, poisoning was configured, by the criminal justice system, the public and the press, as an essentially *female* crime. Without the proper and appropriate supervision of a man, women were liable to be overcome by sexually-related emotions, become potentially dangerous to those around them and threaten the basis of stable society. Such unsupervised women could commit heinous crimes, but ones of insidious and 'sneaky' passivity, in line with their 'natural' characteristics.

Such ideas also required a very specific definition of what constituted 'violence', as an act requiring physical strength in the open, rather than an equally harmful act committed with malice aforethought, committed, supposedly, in the dark of night against an unresisting victim. Through such 'understandings' of poisoning, the public, press, and courts tried to maintain norms of gender and class. Recognising that women, middle class or otherwise, were as capable of violence as men, or that men were liable to resort to 'passive' crimes such as poisoning, would challenge the entire classed and gendered edifice around which society as structured.

What are also revealed are the cracks in such discourses. The recognition of male violence and abuse towards women, and the obvious contradictions between Victorian class and gender ideals and reality, are exposed in the protests and sympathy expressed towards many women; by the very public, press, and criminal justice system that judged those women by the same standards they critiqued and objected to through such sympathy. Even women's apparent threats to poison abusive men reveals the oppression of women and their agency in resistance; an agency Victorian society did its utmost to deny. But through this study of female poisoning, we see signs that the centre would, eventually, not hold and begin to fracture under the weight of its own contradictions.

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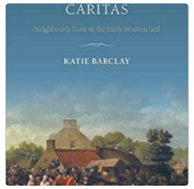

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