

Passion, Poison & Pistols: Media Representations & Social Constructions of Female 'Crimes of Passion' in England, 1820-1856

By Kaye Leese¹

Abstract

This dissertation shows that the media constructions of mid-19th century murderesses were not as straightforward as some other historians have suggested. Using contemporary newspaper reports it will demonstrate that although many women received a uniformly negative response to their actions, there was a complex criteria underpinning her portrayal. The media was influenced by a woman's physical appearance, her personal life and emotional state, her religious devotion and her relationship with the victim, who was also intensely scrutinised. Class conflict is also evident in this research; a working-class murderess was considered a danger to middle-class notions of sexual honour and acceptable female behaviour. The idea of transgression allowed media reporters to make sense of such deviance. This dissertation shows how using this methodology can give historians a valuable insight into the everyday lives working-class women and also an opportunity to see patriarchy in action.

¹ This dissertation was submitted in part-fulfilment of the degree of BA (Honours) Historical Studies, Classical Civilisations and Art History at the University of Manchester (2007).

Introduction

“It seems almost clear that a woman who would not lift her hand against a man or child will unhesitatingly drop arsenic into their food,” lamented one journalist from *The Times* during the peak of the so-called “poisoning panic” of 1847-1852 (The Times, 8 Aug. 1849, Wiener, 2004b, ch. 4). This quote demonstrates the three central aims of this thesis; firstly, how did newspapers portray women accused of ‘crimes of passion’, secondly, how did they try to come to terms with and make sense of this behaviour and finally, how did this relate to prevailing conceptions of gender and understandings of sexuality, domestic relationships and religion?

An attempt at ‘slotting’ this thesis into current scholarship has proved to be difficult for two reasons. Firstly, although this thesis is concerned with female criminality, it is neither attempting to analyse the types of crimes women most often committed nor investigate the legal treatment of female criminals as several historians have already considered. Secondly, and most importantly, using newspaper reports as an analytical tool to understand perceptions and constructions of female criminals in the nineteenth century is a relatively new methodology but its historical value is now being recognised. A key study which has utilised this new methodology has been Judith Knelman’s book *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* in an attempt to explore the “little-known and under-examined phenomenon” of the female murderer (Feeley, 1994). Knelman’s work, however, is based on a large sample of ‘sensationalist’ crimes and she has argued that female murder was spurred by economic motivations and portrayed in a uniformly negative light (Knelman, 1998). In contrast, this thesis is only concerned with the ‘crime of passion’ and for practical reasons can only analyse a relatively smaller sample. In addition, it intends to unravel the intricacies of media attitudes to these crimes and is committed to the idea of the “domestic drama” (Guillais, 1990); that ‘crimes of passion’ were unique crimes which revealed much about the nature of marital relationships and contemporary gender ideologies.

The work of Martin Wiener, of which a majority is drawn from newspaper reports, has also been crucial to the field of perceptions of female criminality. He has suggested a broad shift in attitudes towards male and female offenders, particularly murderers, which resulted in women being regarded as “less dangerous and more in need of protection”, while men were considered as “more dangerous and more in need of control” (Wiener, 2004a). In addition, Lucia Zedner, another key figure in the field, has argued that the Victorian period witnessed a redefinition of female deviants from “bad” to “mad” and this was “paralleled by a decrease in female levels of crime” (Feeley, 1994). At the core of her argument is the importance of gender “in determining attitudes and responses to criminality” (Zedner, 1994) and much feminist scholarship also confirms this notion. In addition, Ruth Harris has emphasised the importance of gender to the accused as well as to the legal system in her study of feminine ‘crimes of passion’ in fin-de-siècle Paris. She argues that where the accused presented herself in a way that was “reassuringly feminine”, albeit melodramatically and based on “physiological disequilibrium”, a picture of feminine violence emerged which was neither “socially dangerous nor morally deviant” and thus produced scores of acquittals in French assize courts throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Harris, 1988, p. 58). What is particularly significant in Harris’s study for this thesis is both women’s freedom of action and how gender ideologies functioned in the social interpretation of their crime. More recently, Anne-Marie Kilday (1995) has argued that extreme violence, although generally not associated with women, was a feature of female criminality and that it can be seen as evidence of women challenging contemporary ideals of femininity. However, the exact consequences of these ideals on female criminals is an area which still needs some attention, but in the main, historians and criminologists have argued that ideals of femininity meant harsher legal,

moral and social judgement for all female deviants, not just murderers, and this is at the heart of this thesis.

In terms of the approach, this thesis is concerned with understanding constructions of murderers and the impact of these ideals from a top-down perspective; it does not contend that the opinions of journalists are representative of any section of nineteenth-century society but can reveal much about the basis of such opinions. In this respect, this thesis is interested in how an important social institution, such as the popular press, wanted the general public to feel about such women and the implications of their crime.

In order to fulfil the three aims, this thesis will consider the media representations and constructions of twelve cases concerning women who were charged with the murder of their spouses (by which I mean husband or cohabiting partner) between 1820 and 1856. The sample is random and contains women of different ages and from different locations and consequently will not attempt to make generalisations about female 'crimes of passion'. However, all the women from the case studies were found guilty of their crime and are predominantly drawn from the working class.² What this thesis aims to show is that gender, morality and class were the issues which held real significance to middle class, male journalists of the period and that this was evident in press coverage of their trials, executions and editorials inspired by their crimes. By carefully examining physical descriptions, the portrayal of both the accused and the victim, choice of weapon, motivation and perceptions about their guilt or innocence and manifestations of remorse, it is possible to really engage with the reports and form a complete picture of how newspapers portrayed, interpreted and ultimately constructed the image of a murderess. Linking this to wider issues, as were outlined in the third aim, how did journalists react to the sexual element in these crimes? What role did religion play in portraying a murderess? What did journalists believe to be the implications of such crimes and did a class dimension exist in the press coverage?

Chapter 1

Judith Knelman has argued that women who were accused of murdering their husbands received a "bad press" in the nineteenth century. This was caused by gendered biological beliefs about men and women. As she points out, women's primary biological function was to make and sustain life, not to "stamp it out" and consequently when a rare and unexpected case of murder of an adult by a woman occurred, it made for "exciting news" (Knelman, 1998, pp. 3-4). Her assumption is not unproblematic; men's primary function was also to make and sustain life but as this chapter will demonstrate, constructions of female 'crimes of passion' were significantly more complex than she suggests and a uniform reaction to murderers did not exist. Following this argument, this chapter will firstly focus on physical descriptions of the accused women and consider their implications. Secondly, it will illustrate the importance of language and how specific words and phrases were employed by reporters to convey an array of distinct and gendered opinions and finally, it will analyse the victim and his role in constructing a murderess.

To begin, physical descriptions of the accused women are important for two reasons; on the one hand they have a practical value, they helped the reader to engage with the report by allowing them to imagine the individual, but on the other hand, they were affected by and had implications for biological, social and cultural ideas about women. The work of Vic Gatrell and Rachel Short has shown that criminal women faced social and sexual scrutiny by the public press based on their appearance and demeanour³ which gives them historical value.

² Two of the twelve case studies involve lower middle class women.

³ See Vic Gatrell, 1994, p. 355 and Knelman, 1998, p. 250. Shani D'Cruze argues that physical descriptions revealed much about a woman's alleged sexual reputation, see Shani D'Cruze, 1998, p. 193.

Another historian who has studied the media reaction has been Judith Knelman and the key aim of her research is to find out if female murderers were really as “monstrous” as their depictions. She refers to physical descriptions which emphasised masculine attributes as a key method which reporters used. One such example is Mary Ann Geering, a woman of “masculine and forbidding appearance” who was found guilty and hanged for the murder of her husband in 1849. Similarly, Sarah Chesham, who was executed for the same crime two years later, was described as “masculine-looking” (Knelman, 1998, pp. 64-5). The case of Kezia Wescombe is particularly interesting as the reporter portrayed her as unfeminine and ugly rather than point out distinctly masculine features; “Her figure possesses no points of attraction: the shoulders are high and the breasts are flat.” The reporter considered her to be an “extremely coarse and repulsive-looking woman” (The Times, 17 August 1829). George Robb has argued that masculine descriptions were linked to the contemporary, middle-class belief that these working-class women who poisoned were “marked” as degenerates; their physical appearance was symbolic of their criminal nature and “depraved lifestyles.” He cites, as evidence, the example of Sarah French who was said to “look far older than her twenty-seven years and was of a ‘most repulsive countenance’” (Robb, 1997, p. 178). Robb’s argument is also supported by cases where the reporters used a lack of emotion or particular facial expressions to depict an accused woman negatively. In the case of Catherine Moore, her “distressingly excited state” was highlighted and contrasted with that of her mother, who was tried for aiding and abetting her daughter, who “preserved a sullen and relentless expression of countenance” (The Times, 18 March 1850).

In the case of Catherine Foster the reporter noted that she stood “unmoved” throughout the whole trial and when the guilty verdict was returned, there was a momentary “quivering of the lips” and other than that she “exhibited not the least emotion from the first to the last moment of the enquiry.” The reporter was clearly shocked by her lack of emotion considering the “awful consequences” of the verdict, but in some cases women who displayed too much emotion could also provoke disbelief (D’Cruze, Pegg & Walklate, 2006, pp. 22-23, 42, 48). Despite being found guilty, the reporter was unable to reconcile her obvious physical femininity with the severity of her crime:

“She is not 18 years of age, but her appearance is somewhat good looking, but very simple. Her countenance portrays not the slightest hardihood, or anything indicating her to be a person likely to commit such a crime” (The Times, 3 December 1846).

This also reveals one of the many contradictions in the attitude of reporters; that an attitude of condemnation based on a lack of emotion could be juxtaposed with an overtly feminine physical representation. In addition, the reporter believed that criminals were physically set apart from the rest of society, which supports Robb’s argument, and his inability to sense the deviance of Catherine Foster evidently worried him. Interestingly, he also understood there to be a link between economic hardship and crime suggesting a widespread belief in criminal behaviour as a distinctly working-class problem.

As Knelman has argued, it is evident that some women were depicted as ‘monsters’, but, as it will now be demonstrated, physical descriptions were often considerably more complex and often attempted to portray a murderess more sympathetically. In the case of Mary Ann Higgins, who stood trial for the murder of her uncle in 1831, *The Times* described her as “rather a good looking girl, with fresh colour and clear complexion.” This description provided the foundation for a sense of emotional conflict that the reporter clearly witnessed and perhaps even felt; that a young girl with an “appearance of modesty and innocence” could stand trial for such a horrific crime with such strong evidence against her. Her accomplice, Edward Clarke, was noted for his “indifference manifested by his deportment” in the dock and that despite doubt over his involvement in the murder of Higgins’ uncle, the public took an instant dislike to him (The Times, 11 August 1831). The subjective description offered by

the reporter is, on one level, an attempt to reflect public feeling in the courtroom but on a deeper one was also an attempt at making the case appear tragic and dramatic when Higgins was sentenced to death and Clarke was acquitted. The reporter commented on how Higgins “cried piteously” and how the sentence “excited powerful emotions in the breast of every person” (ibid.) The emphasis on her naive and innocent appearance was a consistent feature in her physical description and the message the reporter may have wanted to convey was an important warning to the reader; that even the most feminine of women was capable of criminal behaviour.

The case of Annette Myers provides another example of an accused woman who evoked strong sympathy from the public and despite being found guilty, was pardoned shortly after her trial. She was described by one reporter as looking “very pale” and holding her handkerchief very close to her face. He also commented that she was “evidently suffering severe mental distress.” Interestingly, in the next line of the report, an immediate contrast is made between her and Mr Bodkin, one of the prosecutors, who was noted as having his “usual calm and temperate manner” (The Times, 4 March 1848). However, this contrast is not so simplistic; the description of Myers was clearly intended to provoke sympathy through emphasising her femininity but it also suggests that the reporter wanted to draw a subtle, yet firm distinction between the two; the criminal and the respectable citizen, nature and civilised society; a “them” and “us” divide (D’Cruze, Pegg & Walklate, 2006, pp. 150, 153). Conversely, a reporter from a different newspaper commented exclusively on her femininity through drawing attention to her “short stature” “small features” and “neat blue velvet bonnet,” but what does this mean?

Davidoff and Hall have argued that the Victorian period witnessed a change in the style of dress among the middle class which reflected the “differentiation between the sexes,” for example, femininity became embodied by images of “delicate complexions, tiny waists, dainty feet and tightly laced, restrictive dresses” (Knight cited in Wolffe, 1997, p. 34). When this is considered with Knelman’s argument that male reporters judged and evaluated the behaviour of the accused “in terms of their own needs and expectations” (Knelman, 1998, p. 25), it could then be argued that these male journalists projected their own middle-class experiences of femininity onto the women in the dock. Unfortunately, these women fell short of such expectations (ibid.) but this view is difficult to reconcile with the cases of Higgins and Myers whose crimes did not ultimately affect their strongly feminine physical descriptions.

One of the most striking aspects of the newspaper reports is the repetition of the words ‘wretched’ and ‘creature’ when talking about the accused women, which implies that their crimes had a moral undertone. In the case of Mary Wittenback (1827) she was never referred to by name; only called the “miserable woman”, “wretched creature”, “wretched culprit” or the “prisoner”. Similarly, throughout the overtly feminine portrayal of Mary Ann Higgins, the reporter used the term “wretched” when the Judge sentenced her to be executed. What can be deduced from this? D’Cruze, Pegg and Walklate have argued that media reporting made “explicit presumptions” about the murderess and adhered to certain concepts like “demon...devil...beast.” This was part of a process of “pathologising the murderer” and also goes some way to explaining the public interest and fascination in murder cases (D’Cruze, Pegg & Walklate, 2006, pp. 22-23). The construction of a murderess also depended on creating a belief that these women were mentally and physically different from the rest of society, thus reinforcing the idea of “them” and “us”. This supports the theme apparent in the physical descriptions, that without this crucial distinction, the implication would have been that any woman was capable of such atrocities (Robertson, 1996, p. 356). However, the evidence from this thesis suggests that the idea of ‘pathologising’ a murderess appears to be problematic; it is true that reporters used similar negative phrases to describe accused women but that this was intertwined with overtly feminine language, as we have seen with Mary Ann

Higgins. The problem with such descriptions and use of language is that it potentially offers conflicting interpretations for the historian. The use of 'wretched' and 'creature' reflects society's attitude of condemnation, but the feminine descriptions suggest both a sense of fear, that aspects of femininity could lead to criminal behaviour in all women, not just a minority, and consequently a strong desire to protect women from themselves. In this respect, it appeals to the contemporary cultural motif of the helpless woman (Wiener, 2004b, p. 127) and provides a degree of legitimisation for patriarchal control.

Creating an image of the victim and piecing together the motivations for murder formed a vital part in the press coverage plot. As we will see, giving the accused and the deceased identities based on images and ideas conjured up by journalists, the crime was transformed into an exciting and often sensational piece of drama. Furthermore, in terms of historical analysis, understanding constructions of victims and their relationship with the accused helps to unravel the mysteries of these so-called "dramas of domestic life" (Guillais, 1990, p. 15).

Annette Myers, the jilted lover, had been driven to shoot Henry Ducker after a two year relationship where she had been used with "utter callousness." It was claimed that besides regularly extracting money from her and infecting her with gonorrhoea, he had not fulfilled his promise of marriage and was having affairs with other women (Wiener, 2002, pp. 125-6). Myers summed up her feelings in the phrase "I shall suffer for it and it will be a warning to others". In the initial coverage of the trial, *The Times* had universally condemned Myer's actions, despite the way she had been treated. Once again, she was referred to as the "wretched woman." However, as the public and the media began to digest the horrors of the case, this image very quickly changed. So how was this change achieved and what consequences did this have on the construction of Annette Myers?

Successfully depicting Henry Ducker as the real villain was crucial to evoke sympathy for Annette and therefore portray her as the victim. *The Times* called Annette a "respectable servant girl" who had performed "honest labour" and emphasised that when Ducker had tried to "drive her into courses of dishonesty and disgrace" so that he would be able to profit from it, she "instinctively revolted." Notice here that by referring to 'instinct', a contradictory attitude is apparent; that a subtle difference is hinted at between the instinct that caused her to shoot Ducker and the instinct which stopped her from prostituting herself and losing her respectability. Perhaps in this context her instinct was praised as it reinforced her feminine sense of honour. Similarly, Annette was no longer the "wretched" murderess, but was referred to as the "poor creature" and "unhappy woman."

In the courtroom, witnesses testified that to their knowledge Ducker had never proposed marriage to Annette and that in his soldier career he had never been in prison or "the black hole for misconduct" (*The Times*, 4 March 1848). Two days later, however, Ducker was portrayed as the embodiment of the immoral and shameful aspects of masculinity, and of soldiers particularly (Wiener, 2004b, p. 126); driven by "lust", "greed" and a desire for "pecuniary profit" (*The Times*, 6 March 1848). The *Morning Post* even called him "the vilest of the vile" (Cited in Wiener, 2004b, p. 126). This change in the construction of Ducker proved so successful that one letter published in *The Times* spoke of Ducker as "this wretched man" and "miserable creature" (*The Times*, 7 March 1848) while another assigned Ducker responsibility for his own demise; "he desired that the woman...should become a harlot – she became a murderer; he desired that she...should fall to the lowest depths of infamy – that desire was granted" (*The Times*, 8 March 1848). A key aspect in the case of Myers and Ducker was that their separate identities as perpetrator and victim were interchangeable; Annette's transition to tragic heroine (Wiener, 2004b, p. 127) and Ducker's move from the innocent deceased to immoral betrayer was clearly defined and successful.

Similarly, the case of Hannah Williams illustrates the significance of the victim and

his moral and sexual misdemeanours in portraying the accused women sympathetically. Williams was accused of grievous bodily harm against her lover, James Newbold, after cutting him in the neck with a knife. Despite the severity of her crime, she was found guilty with recommendation to mercy on account of her “extreme provocation.” As with Annette Myers, Williams was believed to be of “good character” and had provided Newbold with food, clothes and money when he had needed it. The key to her lenient treatment by the court and the press was clearly based on Newbold’s conduct towards her; he had seduced her under the promise of marriage then broken it off to be with another woman (The Times, 28 October 1847. Wiener, 2004b, p. 127). These two cases suggest that there were strong social definitions about what constituted acceptable forms of masculinity running parallel to those about femininity and thus the social criteria, which existed to enable the public to make judgements about criminal and victim, was strictly gendered.

In the case of Sarah Chesham, her relationship with her victim is combined with an intense focus on her past. Before even mentioning the details of the case against Chesham, *The Times* immediately focused on an earlier charge of having poisoned the illegitimate child of a servant in the village, Lydia Taylor, and the trial and subsequent acquittal of the murder of her two children seven years previously in 1843 (The Times, 5 Sept. 1850). In other words, the construction of Chesham as a murderess in *The Times* was founded on her “well-publicized career as a poisoner” (Knelman, 1998, p. 65). Several months later at her trial, Chesham, a “masculine-looking woman” had excited a great amount of interest thanks to her reputation as a “terrible celebrity”, a “professed poisoner.” The reporter made reference to the rumour that Mary May, a woman who had been executed for poisoning her husband two years previously had “admitted...that she had been instigated” by Chesham “to the commission of the dreadful act” (The Times, 7 March 1851), thus implying that the reporter felt Chesham, particularly her influence, posed a threat to the local society.

Although her victim is not directly referred to, Chesham’s husband is sympathised with because he was the victim not only of a murder, but of a wife who blatantly transgressed accepted gender roles. In other words, Chesham used her position as a wife and carer for immoral and illegal purposes and “inverted the ‘normal’ power hierarchy of the household” and this, according to historians like Kilday, is why she received such harsh legal and even media judgement (Kilday, 2005, p. 177). A ballad which was circulated around the time of her execution testifies to this fact and also makes clear that her crime had religious implications:

When she was at the holy altar
 She did a solemn vow then give,
 Her husband dear to love and cherish,
 Whilst God permitted her to live:
 But she the solemn vow has broken,
 Wicked base, deceitful wife,
 Barbarous and cruel mother,
 Doomed to die in prime of life
 (Cited in Knelman, 1998, pp. 65-66).

The idea of transgression is also echoed in other cases; Betsy McMullan was accused of continually administering doses of antimony to her husband Daniel in Bolton in 1856. After being found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to transportation for life, the *News of the World* accused McMullan of having “exhibited the utmost indifference” and said she was “removed from the dock without a change passing over her features” (News of the World, 15 August 1856). The reporter added that nothing seemed to him so “repugnant” as the idea that a “woman lying on a man’s bosom, and almost breathing his breath, should be guilty of such acts” News of the World, 31 August 1856).

Here, the reporter's projections of his own expectations of femininity and relationships is clear, and more importantly he does not attempt to demonise McMullan and portray her as a monster, as Knelman's argument suggests, but rather direct the reader's attentions to what constitutes acceptable gender roles and relationships. Additionally, *The Times* highlighted a similar point by arguing that "the family arrangements of petty tradesmen in our provincial towns" were "not in a very satisfactory condition" (*The Times*, 26 August 1856). Again, murder is given a class dimension and would possibly have given the reader a sense of superiority over the provincial lower middle class.

In the case of Mary Wittenback, the reporter was keen to emphasise that she has been influenced by women of "bad character in the neighbourhood" and that she was "seldom at home to get her husband's meals ready" and "spent her money on drink." In other words, her case suggested a belief that female deviance was caused by flouting domestic duties and leading a selfish lifestyle and perhaps served as a moral lesson for female readers.

Wittenback had confided her intentions to a friend; "he shall deceive me no more, this shall be the last disappointment" (*The Times*, 17 Sept. 1827) and such protests display a similarity to Annette Myers. However, her story was not written in a way to provoke sympathy from the public and this is perhaps due to the fact that Wittenback had poisoned her husband, a man who "conducted himself well towards his wife" (*ibid.*). By putting arsenic into a dumpling, she was perceived as using her role as wife and carer against him (Kilday, 2005, p. 182). With this consideration then, it could be argued that in the newspaper reports, two types of victim emerge; the deserving victim, men like Henry Ducker, and the undeserving, those like Frederick Wittenback. The deserving men appear to have embodied the negative qualities of masculinity, led an immoral life and neglected their partners whereas the undeserving behaved morally and respectably. This distinction between the two types of victim seems to have been another of the factors which influenced the representation and construction of the accused women.

This chapter has shown that newspaper constructions of murderesses were neither straightforward nor simplistic and had multiple dimensions to them. Physical descriptions and linguistic techniques, such as keeping the accused anonymous or referring to her as the "wretched creature" served to carve a definitive line between the criminal and the respectable citizen and thus push these deviant women onto the margins of society. The victim was also crucial in constructing the murderess and from the cases of Annette Myers and Mary Wittenback, it is possible to see how journalists distinguished between two types of victim; the deserving and undeserving, and how this impacted on their perception and portrayal of the accused. What really stands out is how journalists based their reports on their own experiences and expectations of femininity. Next we will consider the role of sexuality and religion in constructing a murderess and discuss the wider implications of female criminality, particularly with women who poisoned.

Chapter 2

In the first chapter, this thesis illustrated the physical and linguistic complexities of female constructions of the individual and her victim. In this next chapter, it will be argued that when a 'crime of passion' was committed, it led the media to reflect on specific issues such as female sexuality, marriage and religion, and that journalists often used the cases to suggest that contemporary social and cultural values were in a state of chaos. Furthermore, crimes of passion allowed the media to negate certain gender stereotypes whilst reinforcing others and this is historically useful as it allows us to investigate accepted forms of feminine behaviour. The fundamental questions here are what role did religion play in constructing a murderess; was a sympathetic portrayal dependent on the murderess displaying a sense of piety, particularly in her final hours? How did they respond to ideas of female sexuality and to the domestic freedoms that working class women appear to have had? Is it possible to find evidence of separate spheres ideology in the attitude of journalists? Finally, why was the public so fascinated, and yet repelled, by these crimes?

Based on witness reports from members of the public as well as reporters, the executions of the women from the case studies allows an opportunity to analyse how women who initially pleaded not guilty, but later made a final confession, could affect their construction. Additionally, it illustrates the meaning placed on their final conversations, family meetings and behaviour by the reporters and demonstrates how reporters used the women to make wider gender judgements based on their reflections of the case and the conclusions they drew from it.

In the case of Mary Ann Higgins who was tried and executed for the murder of her uncle in 1831, the reporter maintained the overtly feminine and sympathetic portrayal with which he had described her during the trial (The Times, 17 August 1831). A constable, who gave evidence against her, claimed that Higgins had both alleged and later denied that she had been seduced by her accomplice and lover, Edward Clarke, who convinced her to murder her uncle for financial gain. However, the reporter chose to comment on how Clarke had had "considerable influence over her mind" (The Times, 11 August 1831). Perhaps the explanation for such a sympathetic portrayal lies in the idea of what Lucia Zedner has called the "pervasive designation of women as non-criminal" (1994, p. 27), that criminal women came to be regarded as "victims of social forces beyond their control"; especially that of male sexual seduction. In the execution report, the journalist referred to the allegation that Clarke had "instigated" the crime and that owing to her continual assertion of innocence, she had behaved with "absolute levity." Throughout the report, she was referred to as the "unhappy girl" or "wretched girl" which again emphasised her naivety and childlike innocence (The Times, 17 August 1831). Therefore, in the case of Mary Ann Higgins, it could be argued that the reporter subscribed to this notion of male seduction and held Clarke responsible, despite his acquittal (Shoemaker, 1998, p. 297). This view supports Martin Wiener's belief of a "Victorian criminalisation of men"; that society came to view women as "delicate damsels" whilst simultaneously regarding men as more dangerous and "more in need of control" (2004a, pp. 184-212). To return to Mary Ann Higgins, a variation on the theme of women succumbing to men has been offered by Ruth Harris; she argues that an "inferior intellectual development" which placed them somewhere between an adolescent and an adult meant that women were often excused for their crime. Owing to their "childish side", they were more "easily suggestible and prone to reflexive, imitative behaviour" which was regarded as "foolish, rather than savage" (Harris, 1988, p.53). Therefore, in the context of Mary Ann Higgins, it could be argued that the reporter presented her sympathetically as he did not deem her a threat to the social order but rather as an example of the weaker, more negative elements

of femininity.

In contrast, some execution reports took a much tougher view on the women concerned and rather than an attempt to express sympathy, they had a different purpose. After Mary Wittenback had been found guilty of the murder of her husband in 1829, *The Times* published several pieces detailing her final confession and execution. The version of events presented by the reporter here can offer a good insight into the contemporary perceptions of crimes of passion and more importantly, details of the transition from ordinary citizen to deviant. According to these articles, due to his ill-treatment of her and a belief in him “intriguing with other women”, Mary “maddened with jealous rage” and “resolved upon revenge” (The Times, 17 September 1827). A key idea which the reporter touched upon was the solitary nature of the 'crime of passion' and this has been noted by Ruth Harris as its most “distinguishing characteristic.” She has argued the importance of the absence of family and friends in both the plan to murder and the act of execution and suggested that this often resulted in sympathetic portrayals of murderers. This was based on the notion that women who did not have a strong family network around them were “unprotected” due to a lack of control imposed on their behaviour (Harris, 1998, p. 40), and thus criminal behaviour among these types of women may have been regarded in a more sympathetic light. However, the case of Mary Wittenback does not support this idea and based on her confession report, suggests something more sinister was imposing itself on her; “at length, prompted by the devil, she resolved to infuse poison...into the dumpling (The Times, 17 September 1827). The link between the devil and the crime of poisoning is critical to understanding the media reaction for two reasons. Firstly, from the evidence of the confession and execution reports, religion in general clearly played a significant role in how reporters interpreted female 'crimes of passion'. In the case of Mary Ann Higgins, the content of the report was visibly dominated by accounts of reading religious tracts, engaging in prayer and taking the sacrament. Arguably, her piety was admired by the reporter and something he attributed to her relatively short and easy death, or at least, was why he kept a description to the minimum. Interestingly although the piece was entitled “Execution at Coventry,” the actual act was not explicitly referred to and appeared as an almost awkward add-on at the end of what was otherwise bordering on propaganda in support of religiosity (The Times, 17 August 1831). Conversely, for Mary Wittenback, allowing herself to be driven by her passion and tempted by the devil had caused her mental distress and a state of hysteria (The Times, 17 September 1827; The Times, 18 September 1827). Additionally, Sarah Chesham’s refusal to have religious instruction her lack of “satisfactory proof of genuine penitence and faith” was perhaps one of the reasons why the reporter chose to comment on “extreme mental sufferings” and gave a gory description of her execution; “Chesham struggled for six or seven (minutes)”, she “died hard” (The Times, 26 March 1851).

For Kezia Wescombe, the role of religion in the execution report made it more like a piece of drama which stressed the triumph of religion and morality over deviance, rather than a factual account. In her trial, for example, *The Times* portrayed her physical features as neither feminine nor masculine and concentrated significantly on her personality and character. In court, Wescombe appeared confident and brash through “addressing her companions at the bar” and “inciting once or twice to cross examine the witnesses” (The Times, 17 August 1829). In contrast, in the report of her execution, the journalist wrote that the “unremitting attentions” of the reverend and chaplain had convinced her to confess and accept responsibility for her actions which caused her to appear “penitent” and physically in a “weak state.” The journalist clearly believed that religion had been responsible for Wescombe admitting her guilt. As with the other examples, religion was imbued with cathartic qualities by the reporters thus highlighting for the historian, the importance that contemporaries placed on the expression of guilt and remorse.

Secondly, the connection between religion and poisoning is arguably a strong indicator of how it was regarded by contemporaries. In an editorial, the *News of the World* expressed its satisfaction over the sale of arsenic finally attracting the attention of the “Legislature”. For the writer, domestic poisonings were “disgraceful to the character of a Christian nation” and that this “national sin” was an example of murder in its “basest and foulest form.” The key argument in this editorial was that even with the regulation of the sale of arsenic, “the vices that accompany poisoning”, particularly “lust”, could only be eradicated through religious instruction (*News of the World*, 23 March 1851).

Another important theme which was raised from the case studies and the press reaction to them is female sexuality. All of the cases featured marital conflict based on sexual jealousy, fears of adultery or a desire to leave their partner for someone else. What is significant about female sexuality is the lack of attention it received from journalists when it was the primary motivation. Reporters preferred to label a crime as motiveless, and thus argued that the victim died for no reason, rather than delve into the emotional and sexual context. For instance, despite including details that Mary Wittenback believed her husband to be having an affair, *The Times* wrote that there was “an entire absence of all motive for the horrible crime (*The Times*, 17 September 1827). In the wake of the Hannah Southgate case in Essex which resulted in numerous accusations of husband poisoning as a result of intimacies with other women, *The Times* said that the motives were “slight and inconsiderable” (*The Times*, 22 September 1848). Could the marginalisation of such motives be seen as indicative of a middle-class attitude of sexual repression?

Lucia Zedner has argued that nineteenth-century female criminality was interpreted within a moral framework with strongly defined notions of femininity. Cultural ideas about women wavered between the image of Eve, which emphasised women’s corruption and ability to corrupt others, and a “highly artificial construct of idealised womanhood” which stressed women’s virginal, pure and honest nature (Zedner, 1991, p. 320). These two stereotypes, she argues, “can be seen as symbolizing middle-class hopes and fears” (1994, p. 12). In this context, the women presented in this thesis, of which the majority were drawn from the working class, could be seen as directly contravening the characteristics that the middle class attributed to their gender (Shoemaker, 1998, p. 297). Although it is not possible to use newspaper reports as evidence of whether or not working-class women subscribed to the same gender ideologies as the middle class, what can be deduced is how they reacted to such blatant expressions of female sexuality.

The idea of female sexual honour and respectability among the working class is one of the key themes which is evident in the cases presented in this thesis. This was often expressed through women’s strong sense of what constituted acceptable behaviour both from them and from their husbands. In court, their motivations and domestic circumstances were of secondary importance but in the newspapers, the “sexual energy” of these women “appealed to the Victorian reader” (Knelman, 1998, p. 14). Maria Manning, for example, was found guilty of the murder of her former suitor, Patrick O’Connor in 1849. With the approval of her husband, O’Connor had “continued his attentions after her marriage”, and when he failed to fulfil his promise of a *ménage à trois*, Maria took revenge. According to Knelman, Maria was a “Lady Macbeth figure” who “turned to her husband for the physical strength needed to murder a man” and contemporaries made much of her “boldness and ruthlessness.” Furthermore, she was young, attractive (although the newspapers insisted that she was not beautiful) and spoke with an “exotic” Swiss accent (1998, pp. 101-102). Of her husband, *The Times* wrote, “George Manning was a mere tool in the hands of his wife, whose uncontrolled temper and impetuous will, working upon his weak and corrupted...disposition.” (*The Times*, 14 November 1849). In this respect, Maria appeared as an Eve-like figure, using her sexuality to not only control her husband but also tempt him into deviance (Zedner, 1991, p. 320). One

leader referred to Maria as the “chief actor in the crime” who “fondled and caressed the intended victim.” Her husband, however, did not escape blame; he was condemned as the “minister and executor of her will” (*The Times*, 27 October 1849). Arguably, Maria was condemned on two levels; not only was she guilty of a heinous crime but she was also guilty of using her sexuality to overpower her husband and thus invert the natural power hierarchy of the domestic sphere (Kilday, 2005, p. 177). This idea of Maria as both the sexual temptress and the threat to male authority evidently captured the imaginations of the readers; *The Times* alone published seventy two articles on the Mannings between August and November of 1849 (Knelman, 1998, p. 103).

In contrast to this, when a woman had a strong definition of sexual honour and thus did not use her sexuality for gain, she was often praised by newspapers and received a much more sympathetic portrayal. With Annette Myers, for example, her “deep and passionate attachment” towards her lover was portrayed sensitively. The concept of women as emotional, rather than rational beings (Knelman, 1998, p. 230) was also referred to; “the combined effects of jealousy, rage and despair were too much for her mind” (*The Times*, 6 March 1848).

By damaging her “sexual, and thus social, reputation” Ducker had indirectly become responsible for the criminal act as he had caused her sanity to become “precarious” and therefore justifying her violence (D’Cruze, Pegg & Walklate, 2005, p. 50). This idea played on the belief that women were naturally more emotional than their rational male counterparts (Knelman, 1998, p. 230).

The moralist approach of contemporaries towards crime which led them to both condemn and be fascinated by female sexuality, also caused a “preoccupation” with women’s alcohol consumption. Pubs, spirit shops and engaging in drinking were regarded as “sources of corruption, degradation and, ultimately, of criminality. According to Zedner, such activities took women out of the home and caused them to neglect their domestic and maternal duties. Moreover, the presence of women in pubs “signified a direct violation of a traditional male bastion” and the “invasion of an arena” which contrasted with and operated outside of the ideal of domesticity. Running parallel with moral concerns were also genetic anxieties about the implications of drunkenness; notably that women who drank would give birth to an “ever-increasing multitude of social failures” (Zedner, 1991, pp. 330-331). In the case of Mary Wittenback, much was made of both her alcohol consumption and socialising in the public sphere and this was used by the reporter to illustrate her downward spiral to criminality; “She was seldom at home to get her husband’s meals ready, and used to pawn her clothes and those of her friends and spend her money in drink” (*The Times*, 17 September 1827).

Another example is taken from an editorial in *The Times* which used a contemporary case to stress the link between spending time away from the domestic sphere and criminality. In the piece, the reporter was lamenting on the prevalence of women poisoners and cited as an example the case of Charlotte Marchant. She had allegedly murdered her husband after meeting a man called Harris at the market-place who “made overtures at her” and “remarked what a fine thing it would be for her if she were a widow.” Arguably, the fact that it was Harris who made the suggestion illustrates Shoemaker’s point that male seduction was of significant importance for contemporaries (1998, p. 297). Furthermore, the reporter highlighted that Marchant was “well-matched, well-housed and well-cared for” with her husband (*The Times*, 8 August 1849) which perhaps depicted this crime as one without adequate motivation but also reflected the middle-class attitude that women needed to be sheltered from the dangers of the outside world, particularly other men (Davidoff & Hall, 2002). In this instance, both the market-place and the presence of Harris had been responsible for Charlotte Marchant’s transition from normal to deviant. In this context, the case provided legitimisation for segregation, in the form of separate spheres, and perhaps also functioned as

a means to oppose the apparent liberties of working class women. In other words, crime among females of the working class was not so surprising when their social habits, such as drinking, and lifestyles were taken into account. It should also be noted that these particular social habits were, as Zedner has remarked, “traditional male bastions” and thus women who took advantage of these were considered as both a threat to male dominance and as deviating from accepted codes of feminine behaviour (1991, pp. 303-331).

Based on this evidence, it is logical to argue that evidence of a repressive middle-class attitude towards sexuality existed and was prominent in constructing murderesses. Explanations for such treatment of female sexuality are difficult in this instance and can only be speculative. However, what particularly stands out is that sexuality was constructed in opposition to the gender ideology of the middle class which was articulated through the concept of separate spheres and consequently, bold expressions of sexuality from the working class were ignored, rather than openly condemned. This supports the view of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall who have argued that middle-class attitudes to sexuality were based on a culture of suppression; male sexuality was to be controlled and women’s ignored, if not denied (Davidoff and Hall, 2002, p. 402). This again highlights the view that middle-class reporters were projecting their ideas of gender and sexuality onto the accused women.

Attitudes to sexuality and the consideration of sexual motivations can provide a valuable insight into marital relationships generally (Guillais, 1990, p. 16). The historiography of this topic has tended to portray such relationships in a negative light, for example, Tanya Evans has argued that “familial relations” in the nineteenth-century were often “far from cordial” and that tension and personal resentments “could and did erupt into violence” (Kilday, 2005, p. 183). Similarly, in her study of nineteenth-century London, Nancy Tomes has argued that regardless of personal experience, “no working class man or woman could escape exposure to violence between the sexes” and that physical conflict was an accepted possible outcome to even the most mundane of marital disputes. Furthermore, when cases of domestic violence and spouse murder were heard in court, they conflicted with middle-class notions of marriage and what constituted appropriate behaviour towards wives or husbands (1978, pp. 328-343). In the cases presented in this thesis, where marital discord was a common factor, could it be argued that this transformed a crime of passion into one of protest against their domestic situation?

Knelman has suggested that economic reasons, such as the pressure of “putting food on the table”, which intensified during the nineteenth century, often underpinned female murders. In this context, when a woman poisoned a member of her family, she was taking control of her economic situation and thus her crime could be seen as one of protest (1998, p. 47). On the other hand, it could also be viewed from the perspective of conformity; that a woman would resort to crime in order to successfully fulfil her domestic role and thus conform to the feminine ideal.

In terms of the physical and emotional relationship between the accused and her victim, it could be argued that in an era where divorce was almost unattainable, murder could offer a “temptingly quick escape from an unhappy marriage” and when considered from this angle, the crime was a form of protest (Bartrip, 1994, p. 893). In the case of Sarah Polgrean, poisoning her “jealous” husband, whom she loved no more than a “dog”, was for her the only way to marry her new love, Thomas Sampson (*The Times*, 15 August 1820). In a similar case, alongside her “paramour” Richard Quaintance, Kezia Wescombe murdered her husband as a way of removing “every obstacle from their union” (*The Times*, 17 August 1829). Certainly this could be viewed as a working-class challenge against the ideals of femininity which were embodied by the middle class (Kilday, 2005, p. 180). However, discussing whether or not ‘crimes of passion’ constituted crimes of domestic protest could be considered irrelevant because it shifts the focus away from the meaning that the individuals gave to the murder. As

Kilday insists, the very presence of these women in court means that they were not hindered by physical strength or gender ideologies (2005, p. 183) but as we have seen, these crimes were linked to everyday situations, not to the bigger social or economic picture. Perhaps this concept can help to explain why the popularity and fascination of these crimes among the public and why they dominated the popular press. As George Robb has argued, these trials offered a window into the “private world of the Victorian home” (Robb, 1997, pp. 176, 187), a view onto the “social ‘other’” and when considered more broadly, provided an opportunity to reflect upon the social institutions and relations of the time (Burney, 2006, pp. 24-25).

To conclude, this chapter has shown the contemporary importance of religion and morality in understanding, interpreting and portraying female crimes of passion. This was often expressed by the middle class through a repression of female sexuality and a condemnatory attitude towards alcohol consumption. It has also shown how criminal behaviour contravened accepted forms of feminine behaviour. Definitions of womanhood, on which these forms of behaviour were based, were not rigid but rather moved between images of corruption, embodied in Eve, and representations of feminine virtue and purity. Despite the middle class repressing sexuality, their working-class counterparts had strong definitions of respectability and sexual honour and were prepared to take action when these were threatened. In the wider context, crimes of passion, particularly poisonings, evoked a strong sense of horror from the public but also a degree of fascination and interest.

Conclusion

“It seems almost clear that a woman who would not lift her hand against a man or child will unhesitatingly drop arsenic into their food” (The Times, 8 Aug. 1849).

The opening quote of this thesis suggested that female 'crimes of passion' evoked a sense of fear and horror from the media, but to what extent is this view compatible with the case studies? Can firm conclusions be drawn from the evidence and what are the implications for further research?

If we consider the first aim of this thesis, which was to investigate how female crimes of passions were portrayed, then what stands out particularly is the complexities of newspaper constructions. Not only were the responses to certain women and their behaviour complex but also the underlying factors which determined their portrayal. As we have seen, physical descriptions, and more importantly the aspects which journalists chose to identify, played a prominent role in creating the image of a murderess. In some cases, journalists emphasised explicitly feminine characteristics, such as a pretty face or clear complexion, and this was often linked to a sympathetic portrayal. The importance of masculine characteristics or depicting women as ugly has also been considered and its relation to both negative representation and a belief in what George Robb has called the “degenerate” working class (1997, p. 178). Thus, physical descriptions were both gendered and classed and this has been a consistent feature throughout this thesis. Arguably, such links were a way of exaggerating the threat that these women posed to society but were also important in giving male, middle-class journalists a sense of superiority.

In terms of the media interpretation of this behaviour, which was outlined in the second aim, the language employed in the reports indicates a need to portray these women as social outsiders. This marginalisation was achieved through drawing a distinction between the reporters, as representatives of respectable society, and the criminal women, which also implies a sense of social superiority. Media judgement was based on the idea that women who murdered had not only broken the law but also codes of feminine behaviour, a recurrent idea being that they had used their domestic positions against their partners. The view of what constituted acceptable behaviour came from the journalist's own ideas about and experiences

of femininity and was projected onto the women they wrote about. However, this attitude was also contradictory; in some of the cases there was clearly a belief, on the behalf of the reporter, that the accused women was not responsible and had perhaps been misled or wronged by another person or an event. This was manifested through an obvious inability to reconcile the woman with her crime and was often influenced by physical appearance and behaviour in court. This brings us on to the role of the victim which was frequently used to imply that male seduction was responsible for creating female deviance. This is an area which has received attention from historians of criminality, particularly Martin Wiener,⁴ and in this thesis, it has had significance for both media constructions and for gender ideals. As we have seen the actions of the husbands and how they compared to middle-class ideals of masculinity was also an important influence on the overall representation, with a firm distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. It would be interesting to see if the same conclusions could be drawn from a male crime of passion and this is an area for potential research.

Analysing the newspaper reports also has important implications for some of the broader social themes as reporters used the cases to make wider judgements about society. Sexuality was a theme which was initially expected to be at the heart of the newspaper reports but was in fact secondary in importance. As the evidence has shown, issues such as adultery and sexual jealousy were considered as working-class problems and were constructed both negatively and against middle-class notions of separate spheres and appropriate feminine behaviour. This conflict was responsible for the attitude of ignorance towards sexuality which was a striking aspect of the media coverage and also led reporters to consider crimes of passion as motiveless.

The centrality of religion in interpreting and portraying these crimes was very significant, particularly in the execution reports. It complements existing studies which have illustrated how contemporaries morally construed crime, especially when committed by women⁵ but has also advanced this by showing that this correlation between crime and morality ultimately affected how female criminals were portrayed. The cathartic quality of religion and its ability to transform a straightforward execution narrative into a piece of drama are two important aspects which should be appreciated in any future studies of the portrayal of female crime.

To consider the perspective behind the research, this thesis was approached 'top-down' because it wanted to investigate how the media created perceptions of female crime. This has proved particularly useful because it has offered a valuable glimpse of the basis of contemporary gender ideologies and more importantly, it has been able to contextualise them. This approach is not new but where it has differed from the existing scholarship, such as that of Judith Knelman (1998), is that it has revealed the level of contradictions and complexities. With these conclusions in mind, the opening quote of this thesis should be regarded as one of the many viewpoints espoused by contemporary journalists. Primarily, what this thesis has shown is that media constructions and representations of female crimes of passion are not always as black and white as the ink they were printed with.

⁴ See, for example, Martin Wiener, (2004a) 'Alice Arden to Bill Sykes: Changing Nightmares of Intimate Violence in England, 1558-1869,' *Journal of British Studies* 4(2), pp. 184-212 and also Martin Wiener, (2004b) *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ See, for example, Zedner (1991).

Bibliography

Primary Sources

News of the World, 1851, 1856.

The Times, 1820-1856.

Secondary Sources

Bartrip, Peter. 1994. How Green was My Valance?: Environmental Arsenic Poisoning and the Victorian Domestic Ideal. *English Historical Review*, 109(433), pp. 891-913.

Burney, Ian. 2006. *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Davidoff, Leonore & Hall, Catherine. 2002. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge

D'Cruze Shani. 1998. *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women*. London: UCL Press

D'Cruze, Shani, Pegg, Samantha & Walklate, Sandra (eds.), 2006. *Murder: Social and Historical Approaches to Understanding Murder and Murderers*. Cullompton: Willan

Feeley, Malcolm. 1999. Review of Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. *H-Net Reviews*.

Gatrell, Vic. 1994. *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Guillais, Joëlle. 1990. *Crimes of Passion: Dramas of Private Life in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Polity Press

Harris, Ruth. 1988. Melodrama, Hysteria and Feminine Crimes of Passion in the Fin-De-Siècle. *History Workshop Journal* 25, pp. 31-63.

Kilday, Anne-Marie. 2005. 'Women and Crime,' in Hannah Barker & Elaine Chalus (eds.), 2005. *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850: An Introduction*. London: Routledge. pp. 174-193.

Knelman, Judith. 1998. *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*. Toronto: Toronto University Press

Knight, Frank. 1997. Male and Female He Created Them: Men, Women and the Question of Gender,' in John Wolfe (ed.), 1997. *Religion in Victorian Britain* Vol. 5, pp. 24-55.

- Robb, George. 1997. Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England. *Journal of Family History* 22(02), pp. 176-191.
- Robertson, Cara. W. 1996. Representing "Miss Lizzie": Cultural Convictions in the Trial of Lizzie Borden. *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 8, pp. 351-416.
- Shoemaker, Robert. 1998. *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* London: Longman
- Tomes, Nancy. 1978. A "Torrent of Abuse": Crimes of Violence between Working-Class Men and Women in London, 1840-1875. *Journal of Social History* 11(03), pp. 328-345.
- Wiener, Martin. 2004a. Alice Arden to Bill Sykes: Changing Nightmares of Intimate Violence in England, 1558-1869. *Journal of British Studies* 4(02), pp. 184-212.
- Wiener, Martin. 2004b. *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wiener, Martin. 2002. 'The Trial of Annette Myers,' in Kerry Greenwood (ed.), 2002. *On Murder 2: True Crime Writing in Australia*. Melbourne, pp. 125-131.
- Zedner, Lucia. 1991. *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*. Oxford: Clarendon
- Zedner, Lucia. 1991. Women, Crime, and Penal Responses: A Historical Account. *Crime and Justice* 14, pp. 307-362.