

**Depictions of a Poisoner:
Examining Press Coverage of Female Poisoners as a Means of
Investigating Changing Ideas of Women's Character During 19th
Century England**

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A Graduating Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements, in the
Honours Programme.
For the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
In the
Department
Of
History

The University of Victoria
April 1, 2022

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Introduction

On May 18th, 1849, Thomas Ball of Nuneaton returned home after a day of fishing to partake in a bowl of gruel made by his wife, Mary. By the 20th of May, Thomas was dead. As reported by the *Birmingham Gazette* eight days later, “considerable excitement” was caused in the town after Mary was convicted of murdering her husband.¹ Over the next two months, over 130 articles on the case would be published, in at least twenty different periodicals, discussing Mary’s trial and subsequent execution.

According to Alison Young, the discourse of the periodical press was “pervasive, non-specialist and every day in nature” and the reading of newspapers an accepted part of daily ritual.² Moreover, the press was also the “...most significant organ for disseminating knowledge, information, and social attitudes...” in nineteenth-century England. Moreover, content heavily emphasised representations of gender, particularly in the more sensational and detailed pieces on deviant women.⁴ While over three thousand men were hanged in England during the nineteenth century, extensive press coverage was primarily directed towards the under two hundred women executed in the same time period, revealing a powerful and recurrent trend in public interest.⁵ Poisoning cases involving women were particularly reported, regardless of the relatively small instance of that crime (around forty cases) during a hundred-year period.⁶ Female poisoners

¹ *Birmingham Gazette* 28 May 1849; *Daily News*, 28 May 1849.

² Alison Young, *Femininity in Dissent* (London: Routledge, 1990), viii.

⁴ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xi.

⁵ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 176–177.

⁶ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 15-17.

defied the Victorian ideological vision of female passivity, ensuring that their crimes would garner abundant public attention.⁷

Recent historical literature on topics concerning women, murders, poisonings, and periodical coverage of cases of this nature has been expansive. The work of Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnson on gender and the Victorian periodical provides insight into the strong role played by periodicals in reconciling gender ideologies, during a period of increasing influence of the press on a rapidly expanding readership.⁸ Susie Steinbach provides an overview of the lives of women in England from 1760 to 1914, while Randa Hadfield's work focuses on the regulators of feminine behaviour during the Victorian era, specifically law and society, and how these regulators influenced the treatment of female poisoners in court.⁹ Lizzie Seal and Lucia Zedner both expand on gender based ideologies and their influence on attitudes to female criminality during the Victorian era, with Seal further detailing representations of murderous women.¹⁰ George Robb and Victoria Nagy both contribute to the literature analyzing domestic poisonings in Victorian England, emphasizing how the hidden nature of the act provoked a strong public response to the crime.¹¹ The primary authorities on the specific subject

⁷ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 3-4; Victoria M Nagy, "Narratives in the Courtroom: Female Poisoners in Mid-Nineteenth Century England." *European Journal of Criminology* 11, no.2 (March 2014): 214-215.

⁸ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2, 20.

⁹Susie Steinbach, *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004); Helfield, Randa. "Female Poisoners of the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Gender Bias in the Application of the Law." (*Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 28, no.1 1990): 53-101.

¹⁰Lizzie Seal. *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹¹ Victoria M Nagy, "Narratives in the Courtroom: Female Poisoners in Mid-Nineteenth Century England." *European Journal of Criminology* 11, no.2 (March 2014): 213–27; George Robb,

of this thesis, press representations of women murderers throughout the entire nineteenth century, are Judith Knelman in her analysis of press representations of women murderers throughout the nineteenth century and Bridget Walsh's investigation of literary and cultural representations of domestic murder.¹² In contrast to the studies by Walsh and Fraser (et al), this paper will look at journals published in regional and local centers in addition to national newspapers, as well as pamphlets and broadsides.¹⁴ This research will also follow the micro-historical approach of Victoria Nagy, but pulling samples from the entire century.¹⁵

Covering a hundred-year period begs the question of the potential changes that occurred throughout the century. At its core, this paper will explore what changing ideas of female character can be identified in this press coverage by exploring the following questions. Did the language used to depict women in periodicals change throughout the century? Are there differences in the depictions of women depending on the size and geographic locality of the publication (i.e., local, provincial, or national)? Can possible changes in reporting styles and language be linked to legal and cultural shifts of the time? This paper analyzes three similar cases of female murderers which attracted a disproportionate amount of attention in the periodicals of Victorian England: Ann Barber, executed in 1821; Mary Ball, in 1849; and Mary Lefley, in 1884. Judith Knelman details that murderous Victorian women received "bad press," but adds that these depictions of the women evolved out of conceptions of devious monsters

"Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England." *Journal of Family History* 22, no. (2 April 1997): 176–90.

¹² Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations*. London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014.

¹⁴ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Victoria Nagy, *Nineteenth-Century Female Poisoners: Three English Women Who Used Arsenic to Kill* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

prevailing at the start of the century, to creatures viewed with similar revulsion by men and women alike by mid-century, and finally, towards the end of the century, in more sympathetic terms.¹⁶ In slight contrast, this study suggests ideas of women's character, as depicted in the press, were consistently negative throughout the century, only in different ways.

¹⁶ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 42-43, 229.

Case Study 1: Ann Barber

The first article regarding this case, published in March of 1821 in *The Times*, provides a nearly lyrical introduction to the Barber family: “For some time past there has lived at Royd’s-green, in the parish of Rothwell, near Leeds, a family of the name of Barber.” Forty-four-year-old Ann had three children, one with a previous husband, and the second two with her current husband, James Barber. She was also said to have “long carried on an illicit connexion with a young man,” identified in a later article as William Thompson, who was boarding with the Barbers.¹⁸

This brings the reader to a Saturday night in March 1821. After he complained of feeling ill, Ann offered James a roasted apple. When his discomfort worsened, Ann offered him some sweetened beer, which only increased his pain, causing him to request that Ann fetch medical aid. After consulting with neighbors, who urged that she comply with his wish, Ann “declined, alleging that it was useless, and that her husband would be dead before morning.”¹⁹ He had died by three a.m. The testimony of these neighbours led the local coroner to deem the death suspicious. After the discovery of arsenic in James’s stomach, Ann was questioned as to its origin. She denied possession of any arsenic, and the jury adjourned to allow time to investigate its origin. Ann was taken to a Wakefield druggist, who recognized her and said that she had purchased a quantity of arsenic. The jury indicted Ann for wilful murder and she was sent to York Castle to await trial.²² As will be demonstrated in later chapters, Ann’s case saw comparatively less press attention, particularly in the early days of the discovery of the crime. In

¹⁸ *The Times* 28 March 1821.

¹⁹ *Stamford Mercury* 30 March 1821.

²² *Lancaster Gazette* 31 March 1821.

the first two weeks after James's death, around six articles appeared in newspapers detailing the crime and inquiry. Each article attributed the information regarding Ann's alleged connection with the young man boarding at the Barber's home to the local (Wakefield) newspaper.

Further insight into the public's apparent ideas about Ann's character can be gleaned from the detailed articles published in August 1821 covering her trial and execution. The *Leeds Mercury* outlines evidence of the case, including the results of the examination of James' body, the witness testimony to the purchase of arsenic by Ann and further witness testimony describing the events of the evening of James' death. The evidence presented also included details about Ann's relationship with William Thompson. The article provides details of their connection, and how they had temporarily gone to live together before their landlord evicted them after learning they were not married. In describing the return of both Ann and William to her home with James, the article notes "She then returned to the husband, who had the good nature or rather the folly, to receive her." The character descriptions of Ann and James continue in published quotes from the trial. Two witnesses noted that, after being labelled a "cuckold" by the community, James had, separately to each of them, shared his desire to "put an end to himself." Ann was described by a former employer as "a very good servant, a beautiful servant." In contrast, a second witness, Mary Calvert, described James as "a quiet, soft, harmless man" and Ann as "an uncommonly industrious woman" who was referred to by the community as a "wh---."²⁶ These descriptions of Ann and James indicate that there was a focus on appearance where Ann was concerned, and personality regarding James when asked to describe the characters of the accused and victim, suggesting appearance is indicative of character for women specifically. Lyn Pykett

²⁶ *Leeds Mercury* 18 August 1821; *Jackson's Oxford Journal* 18 August 1821; *Newcastle Courant* 18 August 1821.

explains how that notion was also shared by the press. The press depicted accused women murderers as ‘properly’ or ‘improperly’ feminine, the latter variety being defined as unrestrained, immoral, and energetic.²⁸ Outside of the witness testimony, this same article describes Ann as “This unhappy woman [who] had the appearance of having been a sober, grave, thoughtful, and industrious person. She was meanly clad and looked considerably older than the calendar represented her.” The article also makes note of her “rather loud tone” when pleading not guilty, alongside her shrieks following the guilty verdict.³⁰ Ann’s immoral act of (alleged) adultery, her energetic nature via her industriousness, and her bold tone and unrestrained reactions make for an “improperly feminine” characterization by the press.

Prior to the “golden age of newspapers” in the 1850s, single sheet handouts printed locally, or broadsides, were a prominent means of disseminating information regarding sensational crimes.³¹ With no provisions for public education until 1833, the literacy rate of the working class was around fifty percent.³² Yet, as Knelman suggests, general literacy was sufficient to ensure that most people could comprehend the large and sensational headlines and subtitles of broadsides. The affordable sheets were also often posted throughout town and read aloud in public reading rooms, and as such, made very accessible to the working-class public.³⁴ Two such broadsides, located regarding Ann’s case, were printed in York (the location of the trial) and nearby Newcastle. While publication dates are not included, likely to allow for

²⁸ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (Taylor and Francis, 2003), 20-37, 140.

³⁰ *Leeds Mercury* 18 August 1821; *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* 20 August 1821.

³¹ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 32, 36.

³² Amy J Lloyd, “Education, Literacy and the Reading Public.” *British Library Newspapers*. (Detroit: Gale, 2007), 2.

³⁴ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 32.

circulation well after the event, both broadsides were published sometime following the execution, as each discusses the crime, trial, and execution. In each publication, the crime garners the majority of attention, particularly Ann's alleged affair with William Thompson.³⁶ Considering these sheets include all aspects of the case, it is understandable that neither include as many details as the series of articles published in newspapers, such as lengthy witness testimony, but the choice to focus on Ann's (alleged) relationship with William is of particular note. This focus could suggest the broadsides were pandering to the "worst prejudices of the reading public."³⁷ Additionally, not only were broadsides accessible sources of news, but in Ann's case, they were also often "used as excuses for moralizing." Apart from the imbalance in topical focus, the broadsides generally reiterate the same descriptions that are published in regional newspapers. While Knelman notes that "newspapers did not take the same liberties with the truth," as their content was authored by "well-educated professional writers," the broadsides in Ann's case do not provide any additional statements, suggesting that the language used to describe Ann was considered appropriate to use in both provincial publications and broadsides, and as such, for each audience.³⁹ While both the broadsides and regional newspapers described Ann as a "wretched victim of impure desires," national publications such as *The Times* do not address her alleged affair, and describe her, in a more sympathetic manner, as "gentle and

³⁶ John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *Murder and Petit Treason: An Account of the Execution of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Marsball, Printer, Newcastle. August 1821, and John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Carrall, Printer, Near Foss Bridge, York. August 1821.

³⁷ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46-47.

³⁹ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 33, 35-36.

resigned.”⁴⁰ While this could merely indicate a difference in the presumed interest of the target audience of each type of publication, it could also simply be a preferred delivery style to each audience, and not actually evocative of the views of the respective readership.

After being presented with the evidence, the jury deliberated for a mere five minutes, before returning with the verdict.⁴¹ Ann maintained her innocence, and that she left “it to God and [her] conscience.”⁴² The judge responded with the verdict: “Ann Barber, you have been found guilty of the dreadful crime of murder, and a murder of a very aggravated nature, inasmuch as it was a murder of your husband, whom, by your marriage vow, you were bound to love and cherish.” Ann was found guilty of both murder and petit treason. Up until 1828, Petit (or petty) treason was a charge applicable to a woman who murdered her husband, though in contrast, a husband who killed his wife would only be charged with murder. While burning at the stake as a punishment for petty treason ended after 1790, the charge remained for women due to “anxieties about husband murder,” which prevailed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴ Bridget Walsh describes how terminology shifted to that of “domestic murder” by mid-century and provides a case study with a near identical statement by the judge in another case of a woman who murdered her husband. At the trial of Sarah Westwood in 1843, the judge “emphasized the particularity of domestic murder, accusing Westwood of murdering ‘one whom it was your duty to have cherished and protected instead of to have injured and attacked. I can

⁴⁰ *Newcastle Courant* 18 August 1821; *The Times* 16 August 1821.

⁴¹ John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *Murder and Petit Treason: An Account of the Execution of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Marsball, Printer, Newcastle. August 1821.

⁴² *Leeds Mercury* 11 August 1821; 18 August 1821; *Leeds Intelligencer* 20 August 1821.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106-105.

scarcely conceive a crime of greater enormity or one of deeper dye.”⁴⁵ Elizabeth Foyster argues that fear of husband murder was reflected in the law and in the word choices of judges, even after the charge of petty treason was no longer applicable. Foyster notes that “a violent wife not only subverted her own gender identity, but also threatened her husband’s masculinity by exposing him as impotent and helpless.”⁴⁷

Nearly all articles detailing Ann’s reaction to the verdict describe her as having “cried and wept in the bitterest manner.” The *Leeds Mercury* further details how she clung to an individual next to her and cried “O save me, save me.”⁴⁸ As such, it is interesting to note that while the act of killing her husband was seen as a subversion of her gender, press depictions continue to add statements that emphasize her essentially feminine nature. This could potentially be explained in the framework put forward by Knelman, specifically of men and their control over the image of murderesses for their own gain.⁴⁹ In his study on poisonings in Victorian England, George Robb adds to Foyster’s description of the threat posed by a murdering wife by suggesting that she “evoked fears of sexual anarchy and decreasing patriarchal authority.” Robb also notes how the “popular image of the poisoner remained overwhelmingly female, drawing on the archetypal images of the sorceress from Circe to Morgan La Fay.”⁵¹ Could this weak and feminine depiction of Ann in the press coverage of her trial merely be an exact retelling of Ann’s

⁴⁵ Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 14.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 105-106.

⁴⁸ Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 14.

⁴⁹ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 225-226.

⁵¹ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 177.

actions, which may have been her attempt to garner sympathy, and as such, a pardon? Or could it possibly be a tactic by the men in control of press images to perpetuate the construct of women as weak, and as such, reverse the subversion of the murdering females' gender? Or a combination of both?



Figure 1 John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Carrall, Printer, Near Foss Bridge, York. August 1821.

On August thirteenth, Ann was placed on a hurdle (or sledge), a part of the punishment still linked to a charge of petty treason, and dragged to the platform, where she was hanged.⁵² The *Leeds Intelligencer* describes the scene as “shocking to the humanity.”⁵³ Found on the top of one of the broadsides covering her execution, an image is included of a platform with a number of figures hanging (presumably not a depiction of Ann specifically, but a general execution scene).⁵⁴ This (likely) regenerated image further highlights the inexpensive production value of broadsides, as well as their sensational nature. Further, while this image provided the reader with

⁵² John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Carrall, Printer, Near Foss Bridge, York. August 1821.

⁵³ *Leeds Intelligencer* 20 August 1821; *Hereford Journal* 22 August 1821; *Norfolk Chronicle* 25 August 1821.

⁵⁴ John Johnson Collection (Crime) of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Libraries. University of Oxford. *A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*. Carrall, Printer, Near Foss Bridge, York. August 1821.

a visual sense of the event, or at least a suggestion of it, the associated press coverage on its own certainly formulated an interesting character in its depiction of Ann Barber. While Ann Barber's story may include a poisoned apple, the depictions of her case clearly could be classified as anything but a fairy tale.

Case Study 2: Mary Ball

Thirty-two-year-old Mary Ball married Thomas Ball in 1837. During their twelve-year marriage, Mary gave birth to six children, of whom Mary Ann was the only to survive infancy.⁵⁵ As noted in nearly all articles covering this case, Mary and Tom were not known to have a happy marriage. The dissatisfaction is said to have stemmed from Thomas' suspicion that Mary was engaged in "an improper intimacy [with] a young man."⁵⁶ The article on the case in the *Morning Post* highlights that, a few weeks prior to Thomas' death, Mary approached a friend and explained that her husband had beaten her due to his suspicions of her infidelity. She also told her friend that, if he did so again, Mary would poison him.⁵⁷ Additionally, it was discovered that she had, around the same time, purchased a quantity of arsenic and allegedly asked some witnesses how much of it would be required to kill a man.

As noted in the introduction, Thomas returned home on May 18th, 1849, after a fishing trip and was given a bowl of gruel by his wife to warm him.⁵⁸ After eating it, Thomas became violently ill. Mary left the home to notify a man named Petty of her husband's state, and while Thomas initially refused to see a doctor, with Petty's urging, the next day one was brought in.⁵⁹ The following day, Mary again attempted to bring the medical man back to her husband, but upon hearing that Thomas was no longer vomiting, the doctor refused to come. Mary attempted to seek out a second medical opinion but was told to follow the advice of the initial medical man.⁶⁰ By the next day, Thomas had died. Petty returned to find the expired Thomas and an

⁵⁵ *Nottinghamshire Guardian* 2 August 1849; 16 August 1849.

⁵⁶ *Birmingham Gazette* 28 May 1849; *Morning Post* 7 April 1849.

⁵⁷ *Morning Post* 30 May 1849; *Berrows Worcester Journal* 31 May 1849.

⁵⁸ *Birmingham Gazette* 28 May 1849; *Derby Mercury* 30 May 1849.

⁵⁹ *Morning Post* 30 May 1849; *Era* 26 August 1849.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 30 July 1849; *Chelmsford Chronicle* 3 August 1849;

inconsolable Mary. Mary was brought to a neighbor's home to be cared for, during which time she confided that she was concerned they would find her husband had been poisoned and blame her. Friends of Thomas determined to have the body examined, and the *post mortem* examination found arsenic in his stomach which, given Mary's confirmed trip to purchase arsenic, resulted in her indictment for *wilful murder*.⁶² The details of the trial, which occupied the court over ten hours, were published in over twenty-five newspapers before her execution. Mary's defense admitted that Thomas was killed by poison, but claimed the package of poison had accidentally been added to the gruel by Thomas himself and that it was purchased for the typical use of vermin-control. Considering statements Mary made to witnesses, indicating her desire to kill her husband and her questions to the druggist as to the quantity of arsenic needed to kill a man, the defense did not hold up. The judge allowed that the purchase of the arsenic may have been for the lawful purpose of vermin control, but that such a purpose could have been utilized by Mary as a means of educating herself on the "deadly use" of the arsenic. The judge put forward a motive that "she had acquired a dislike to [Thomas], and an attachment for William Bacon [the man with whom she was alleged to have had an affair]."⁶⁵ Following a two hour deliberation, the jury returned with a verdict of guilty, though with a recommendation for mercy. The judge dismissed that recommendation.⁶⁶

In contrast to the comparatively less abundant press coverage of Ann Barber, Mary's case inspired over 130 articles. As with Ann, the most articles introduced the crime by highlighting the unhappy life of the couple's "in consequence of her alleged unfaithfulness to him."⁶⁷ In

⁶² *Morning Post* 30 July 1849.

⁶⁵ *Standard* 31 July 1849; 6 August 1849; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* 2 August 1849.

⁶⁶ *Ipswich Journal* 4 August 1849; *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* 5 August 1849.

⁶⁷ *Birmingham Gazette* 28 May 1849.

contrast to the publications discussing Ann, the addition of “alleged” to suspicions of Mary’s unfaithfulness deviates slightly from the more blatant assertions of Ann’s infidelity, potentially indicating the beginning of a shift in social attitudes by mid-century, as suggested by Knelman.⁶⁸ Yet, the alleged affair is still included in nearly all publications concerning Mary’s case, including a number of national papers, and the mere suggestion of infidelity likely had the same impact on assumptions about the character of Mary as a blatant statement confirming the affair. As Victoria Nagy elaborates, “[t]he expectation of a woman was to be the moral guardian of her family, creating a loving environment free of sin.”⁶⁹ Further, as Robb details, “several women [during the mid-nineteenth century] were convicted of poisoning their husbands less on the basis of sound evidence than for their “improper intimacies” with other men.” Examples include the trial of Sarah Barber in 1851, during which the witnesses called to testify were asked specifically to speak on her infidelities.⁷¹

For Mary’s case, only two broadsides were found, and each includes a slightly more sympathetic characterization of Mary than seen in earlier articles, though this was likely only due to the nature of their content. Following the execution, it was discovered that the gaol chaplain, Rev. Richard Chapman, had tortured Mary prior to her execution, by holding her arm over a candle until it burned. The chaplain explained that he did so to “give her some idea of what the torments of hell were.”⁷² While the chaplain resigned following the incident, he was eventually

⁶⁸ *The Times* 28 March 1821.

⁶⁹ Victoria M Nagy, “Narratives in the Courtroom: Female Poisoners in Mid-Nineteenth Century England.” *European Journal of Criminology* 11, no.2 (March 2014): 214-215.

⁷¹ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 183-184.

⁷² *Leamington Spa Courier* 18 August 1849.

officially let go.⁷³ The broadsides also detail that she later confessed to the gaol governor, after refusing to confess to the Chaplain. Considering the debates that began to occur mid-century regarding the merits of execution as a form of punishment, the appetite for news of a “perfectly voluntary confession of her guilt” was particularly heightened.⁷⁴ Moreover, in the case of Mary, the appalling behavior of the chaplain suggests why broadsides that chose to highlight her confession, leave out her alleged infidelity, and thoroughly detail her gratefulness for the “kindness and humane treatment” she received from the Governor.⁷⁵



Figure 2 Local Studies Collection, Coventry Archives. Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. *Particulars of the Treatment of Mary Ball Previous to her Execution, by The Chaplain of Coventry Gaol.* R. Astill, Printer, Coventry, 1849.

⁷³ Local Studies Collection, Coventry Archives. Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. *By Authority of the Under-Sheriff: The Confession of Mary Ball.* S. Knapp, Printer, Theatre Yard, 1849 and Local Studies Collection, Coventry Archives. Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. *Particulars of the Treatment of Mary Ball Previous to her Execution, by The Chaplain of Coventry Gaol.* R. Astill, Printer, Coventry, 1849.

⁷⁴ David C. Cooper, *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), 76-82.

⁷⁵ Local Studies Collection, Coventry Archives. Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. *By Authority of the Under-Sheriff: The Confession of Mary Ball.* S. Knapp, Printer, Theatre Yard, 1849 and *Blackburn Standard*, 22 August 1849, and *Nottinghamshire Guardian* 16 August 1849; *Northampton Mercury* 11 August 1849.

While Mary was found guilty by a jury, it recommended mercy, possibly influenced by Mary's circumstances as highlighted both in the trial and by the press, such as her claim that Thomas beat her, as well as the loss of nearly all of her children. Yet the judge still sentenced her to death. Why? Between 1843 and 1852, seventeen women were executed for the crime of poisoning, "the greatest number of executions for poisoning crimes in modern British history." Nagy details how "the Assize court and coroner's office were working diligently to try and convict these women of arsenic poisoning crimes" out of fear that men were under threat by their wives, wives they also worried were starting poisoning rings in which poisonous recipes would be shared.⁷⁷ This peak in murders via poisoning promoted various arsenic legislation, such as the amendment to the Sale of Arsenic bill in March of 1851 that required purchasers to provide their name, address and purpose for purchase to be recorded by the seller.⁷⁸ The pressure to convict and execute any women found guilty of the crime likely influenced the judge's dismissal of the recommendation for mercy. An article in the *Freeman's Journal* lists all the poisonings that have been happening (including that of Mary Ball) and goes on to question their cause, suggesting "that among Englishwomen of the humbler classes the settlement of conjugal or pecuniary difficulties by the summary help of arsenic is already a habit, and one that is increasing." It continues by suggesting that the evil does not lie in the arsenic or even the crime of murder, but in the "treachery" of the act. The use of the word "treachery" can be connected to Ann's case, in which she was convicted of the now non-existent charge of petty treason. While the official charge of petty treason for the act of murdering a husband by a wife was stricken from law, the

⁷⁷ Victoria M. Nagy, "Narratives in the Courtroom: Female Poisoners in Mid-Nineteenth Century England." *European Journal of Criminology* 11, no.2 (March 2014): 213-215.

⁷⁸ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 67.

association of “treachery” to the crime still clearly persists in public morality. The article also notes that the use of education to address poisonings is insufficient, as education of the “lower” classes only addresses “ignorance and stupidity,” not things such as human affection and teaching morals since, techniques that the article claims are faster than education.⁸¹ This distinction between the lower and uneducated classes, and the upper and intelligent ones, can be seen throughout articles concerning Mary’s crime. When describing her family, one article notes Mary’s siblings and parents are all uneducated.⁸² In contrast, Thomas’ father is described as having the “most respectable character,” further othering Mary, the female poisoner.⁸³

⁸¹ *Freeman’s Journal* 13 August 1849; *Leamington Spa Courier*; 11 August 1849; 18 August 1849.

⁸² *Leamington Spa Courier* 11 August 1849.

⁸³ *Leicestershire Mercury* 1 September 1849.

Case Study 3: Mary Lefley

The third and final case addressed here is that of forty-nine-year-old Mary Lefley. Mary and her husband, William, lived on several acres of land in Wrangle (Lincolnshire).⁸⁴ Prior to leaving for a trip to the market at Boston on 6 February 1884, Mary prepared a pudding for her husband and left it in the oven for him to add milk to and bake when he desired.⁸⁵ After eating it, William began to feel ill, and he offered some to his cats to test his suspicion that he had been poisoned. After the cats were visibly effected, William declared to his maid that he had been poisoned by his wife and ordered her to fetch a doctor. Upon returning home from the market, Mary found Thomas abed with their servants caring for him. After she asked what had happened, William insisted she knew what had transpired and that he did not want to see her again. He also requested to have his will changed so she would not inherit upon his death.⁸⁶ Mary left the room, and a few hours later William was dead.⁸⁷

While Mary Lefley's case was covered by the press almost as extensively as that of Mary Ball, the articles focused almost entirely on the scientific methods and findings of the coroner's investigation. The *Nottinghamshire Guardian* goes into explicit detail on the weight of the victim's organs, the types of experiments used to analyze household items for arsenic, and of course the autopsy of the body.⁸⁹ The articles briefly linger on testimony, particular Mary's explanation of a fight the couple had recently had, after which William had left the house with the intention (she said) of hanging himself. Instead, he returned to the home and offered Mary money to stay quiet, which Mary refused. The jury was directed to consider four questions in

⁸⁴ *Liverpool Mercury* 22 February 1884.

⁸⁵ *Sheffield Independent* 21 February 1884.

⁸⁶ *Liverpool Mercury* 22 February 1884.

⁸⁷ *Sheffield Independent* 21 February 1884.

⁸⁹ *Nottinghamshire Guardian* 22 February 1884.

deciding Mary's guilt or innocence. Was it accidental? Was it an act of suicide? Was the poison intentionally administered? If so, who had administered it?⁹⁰ Knelman points out that newspapers "did not extend their sympathy to desperately poor murderesses," as "the poor were widely regarded as idle and profligate, poverty being a moral failing that victims brought on themselves."⁹¹ In contrast to the depictions of Ann Barber and Mary Ball, articles outlining the trial of Mary Lefley do not comment on her physical appearance, but instead focus on the facts of the case and thoroughly outline her defense, which included the suggestion that the poisoning was a suicide. While this may imply a simple shift in reporting styles, as well as changes to the legal system and the manner in which poisoning cases were tried, it is also important to note that Mary Lefley and her husband were of a propertied class. Their respectable status may have had an impact on the difference in language used for descriptions of Mary Lefley.

Yet, upon closer inspection, the articles contain similar characterizations to those of the previous two cases, just expressed in a more subtle manner. Firstly, George Robb notes that a similar line of questioning had to be addressed in order to secure a conviction, namely that "poison was the cause of death, the suspect had acquired the poison, the suspect had administered the poison, and the suspect had a motive."⁹² While it was confirmed that poison was the cause of death, the answers to the last three questions were ambiguous at best. No druggist was able to identify Mary Lefley. Neither was any arsenic found on their property.⁹³ As noted in the case of Mary Ball, druggists were required to keep record of all purchasers of arsenic, after

⁹⁰ *Nottingham Evening Post* 8 May 1884.

⁹¹ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 21.

⁹² George Robb, "Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England." *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 180.

⁹³ *Nottinghamshire Guardian* 22 February 1884.

the introduction of the Arsenic Act of 1851.⁹⁴ While the cause of death was confirmed to be arsenic poisoning, the arsenic found in the pudding could have been administered after Mary had left and before the milk was added. Moreover, while the allowance for the possibility of suicide is demonstrated in the line of questioning posed to the jury, it is quickly dismissed because of the submission of further observations. Some of the arguably groundless statements suggest that a dying man who, having knowingly poisoned himself, would not have any reason to change his will or accuse an innocent person of the act.⁹⁵ Without addressing the potential for the suicide having been a vindictive act, or the potential for a third party to have been at fault, the deliberation continues, eventually leading to a guilty verdict.

Robb notes how the attempt to answer the questions that would secure a conviction provide information that “tells us much about Victorian society: the state of the medical knowledge, the availability of poisons, domestic routines, patterns of marital conflict and attitudes towards women.” While the science-focused analytical style of the late nineteenth century appears to aim at objectivity, other important considerations, such as witness testimony, seem to be pulled from the foreground, particularly when there is an overreliance on scientific findings. Robb details another problem with the use of scientific evidence in poisoning cases. He notes how the experts in the 1889 trial of Florence Maybrick eventually cancelled one another out, as the evidence from both sides was too complex and conflicting to be followed. Additionally, an expert witness cost money that the majority of women charged with poisoning lacked, meaning that “science remained primarily a tool of the state.”⁹⁶ While Mary Lefley may

⁹⁴ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 67.

⁹⁵ *Nottingham Evening Post* 8 May 1884.

⁹⁶ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 180-181.

have been part of the propertied class, it is unclear if she was able to afford her own expert scientific testimony, as the articles outlining the trial do not mention one.⁹⁷

As for further depictions of Mary Lefley in articles covering her trial, the most interesting interaction between provincial and local papers occurred. Accounts of the trial in the neighboring provincial periodicals, such as that published in the *Nottingham Evening Post*, note disdainfully the statements made by a local newspaper that the jury was urged to ignore and only to consider the facts as laid out to it during the trial.⁹⁸ The local article in question, published in the *Boston Guardian*, details:

There is no doubt that Mrs. Lefley has for years past lead an immoral life, and not altogether without the knowledge of her husband. She has regularly come to Boston for the purposes of prostitution and has carried on similar practices in her own village, although there are some who consider she has of late been leading a better life. She has been heard to boast that she earned a good deal more of the money she and her husband possessed than he did.⁹⁹

The article goes on to suggest that William found Mary in bed with his nephew, after which he beat her. Considering the lack of definitive scientific evidence supporting Mary's guilt, could this local paper's statements still have influenced the decision? After all, the "tone of newspaper reports had an effect on the law as well as public opinion."¹⁰⁰ And while this publication puts forward characterizations of Mary Lefley that are reminiscent of those seen in Ann Barber and Mary Ball's cases, it is also worth noting that the provincial and national publications made note of the existence of a smaller publication and its suggestion of adultery, potentially encouraging the readers to seek out the information, likely influencing their ideas regarding the character of

⁹⁷ *Nottingham Evening Post* 8 May 1884.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Boston Guardian* 23 February 1884.

¹⁰⁰ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 42-43.

Mary Lefley. Knelman argues that the end of the century saw a distinct shift in press treatment of women: “there was an attempt to understand rather than merely condemn murder by women.”¹⁰¹

While this can be seen in national and even provincial newspapers, it seems less true of local publications.

¹⁰¹ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 42-43.

Conclusion

Taken individually, these three case studies initially present a limited insight into the perceptions of the women discussed, as well as the world in which they live. However, once combining an apple, one bowl of gruel and a pan of pudding, along with the requisite arsenic, several trends become apparent. While their poison delivery methods may have differed, each case presented more similarities than were initially anticipated at the outset of this research. During the nineteenth century, “organized feminism was championing married women’s property rights and advocating increased educational, professional and political opportunities for women.”¹⁰² Knelman highlights how this movement eventually had an impact on the highest level of law, namely the Home Office, which ultimately determined whether or not each convicted murderer was hanged. However, she concedes that “[c]lass and gender bias still worked against them.”¹⁰³ This becomes apparent when considering the varying degrees of proof for the possibility of their infidelity. All women saw the consistent mention of their indiscretions, whether alleged or not, in the periodicals covering their cases. While Knelman’s argument supports the observation that, during the last quarter of the century, Mary Lefley received a more neutral characterization from the judicial body and the press, at least at a national level, it is also important again to take note of her economic status, as she was married to a man who owned property, a status that may have influenced the desire to defend her more than the earlier case studies. After highlighting the event-driven nature of newspapers, Knelman observes that “[t]hey

¹⁰² George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 177.

¹⁰³ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 42-43.

are selective and subjective. Newspapers give us what we want to read.”¹⁰⁴ For the purpose of this study, the aim was to analyze text concerning three similar women to discern how about the character of women poisoners changed over time. Without the pervasive interest in women who kill, the possibility of a study of this particular demographic would be up to question. But through this analysis of the publications following each crime, trial and subsequent execution of Ann Barber, Mary Ball and Mary Lefley, it seems clear that the motivation to “present the accused as either acting within the confines of ‘good’ womanhood or exhibiting behaviour associated with ‘bad’ womanhood” persisted throughout the century.¹⁰⁵ While the type of publications demonstrating this tendency shifted throughout the century, the opinions concerning the characters of such women generally remained consistently ‘bad.’

¹⁰⁴ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 42-43.

¹⁰⁵ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England.” *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 225-226.

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