II
The Eloquent Corpse: Gender, Probity, and Bodily Integrity in Victorian Domestic Murder

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Introduction

The bourgeois family was a crucial site of formation of the Victorian middle classes, and the gendered, raced, and classed identities that were produced as much in the home as out of it are increasingly being recognized as partaking in the constitution of national identity, particularly following the passage of the Reform Act 1832. The family provided one of the key underpinnings of nineteenth-century perceptions of social stability and a growing scholarly interest in spousal and domestic homicide in the nineteenth century is demonstrating that the law took a partial and gender-biased view of such killings.1 Victorian public opinion was both shocked and fascinated by such abrupt breaches in domestic felicity. Lethal violence within the middle-class home provided an opportunity through court hearings and their publication in the newspapers for both local and national public reflection on the proper conduct of domestic relations between male and female family members, between adults and children and indeed between masters, mistresses, and servants, in ways that were comparable to (but rather more thrilling than) the publication of Divorce Court proceedings from 1857.2 The disruption of the classed and gendered order of the respectable household by the violent eruption of “fearfully excited passions” enabled the cultural production of moral melodramas which reinforced but at the same time drew attention to the fragility of normative domestic ideals.

A Melancholy Tragedy

The particular melodrama of domestic homicide discussed here is a case of
murder and suicide in an affluent suburb of Manchester. There was a coroner’s hearing, but since the murderer had committed suicide, this was the limit of the legal proceedings. The accounts I am dealing with here are principally those of the local Manchester and Lancaster press. The localized and immediate preoccupations of the coroner’s hearing emerge more clearly as the tale was retailed for local and regional consumption. Harriet Novelli, thirty, devout and (we are told) of “considerable personal attractions” was a recent widow. Her husband, a prosperous Manchester merchant had died aged thirty-five in October 1848 at Scarborough, leaving her with two young children, Louisa Harriet, not yet four years old and Lewis William, just over two.3 The Novellis had lived at Prestwich House, a considerable mansion opposite the church.4 Louis Novelli and his father Phillip before him had maintained business premises in Manchester. His father had retired around 1844 and lived in London. Late in 1849, Harriet and her children had moved to a house bought for her by her father-in-law at Broughton Mount, Higher Broughton, a pleasant, recently built villa overlooking the new race course. Harriet Novelli had furnished the house with “taste and elegance” augmented by many of her late husband’s collection of paintings.5 He had named his brother, Alexander Novelli, one of the executors of his will. Since Lewis’s death Alexander had been living with Harriet and her children in order to settle the estate and had accompanied them to Broughton. Alexander wanted to marry his sister-in-law, but she refused him. He was a couple of years younger than she. They had visited a phrenologist in Manchester who, from the form of her skull, had reassured Novelli that she would make a good wife. The Novelli household seems to have incorporated itself successfully into Broughton society and on the Sunday of her death Harriet had attended religious services in Prestwich and in Broughton and had taken tea with her neighbors, the Costans. Mr. Edmund Costan, a Manchester merchant in his early forties, was another executor of the Novelli will, and thus business, social, and family connections overlapped. Alexander Novelli was due to travel home to London the following morning.

Harriet and Alexander Novelli returned home from the Costans’s around 9:30 P.M. After family prayers, they ate a supper of “oatmeal porridge and milk and treacle” and sat together, anticipating a glass of brandy and hot water before retiring.6 The servant who delivered the hot water unlaced her mistress’s boots, but otherwise left them seated on either side of the fireplace, in attitudes of complete domestic probity. The two were not seen alive again, and so the story of what happened next necessarily had to be deduced by excited journalists, juries, and newspaper readers from constructions and interpretations of the material and corporeal signs that were discovered the next morning. The detective process of course names rather than finds
“clues”—evidence is always already in the process of interpretation. And what first the servants and then the across-the-road neighbor, Mr. Grundy, Mr. Costan, and the doctor found early the following morning, were two bodies. The cold corpse of Harriet Novelli was lying on the thickly carpeted floor of the dining room and the still warm body of Alexander Novelli was in his bedroom, hung from the bedpost by his dressing gown cord. And thus the “melancholy tragedy,” the “terrible catastrophe” unfolded.

Reading the Body

There is a difference in tone between the national and the provincial press. The national Times sketched a picture of the widow’s corpse lying awry with an empty gin glass on the table beside it. The implication of immorality was explicit, signed most clearly in the substitution of the glass of gin for brandy and water. The semiotics of gin as a marker for working-class depravity, was well known to Victorian readers. Gin was the tipple of the prostitute. Victorian Manchester temperance reformers particularly despaired of the women drinkers in the city’s “low spirit vaults.” The more sympathetic and extensive reporting in the Manchester press nevertheless still allowed for an examination of the more pejorative view on Mrs. Novelli’s demise, bringing the shocking possibilities of female depravity to mind even as they were refuted.

The inquest convened first in the Novelli’s house, in a drawing room adjoining the dining room where the murder (and later the postmortem) had taken place and the jurors viewed both the bodies, lying as they had been found. It then adjourned to the Griffin Inn in Lower Broughton. So first, the law appropriated the (violated) domestic space of Harriet Novelli’s home and then shifted the disclosure of domestic and emotional life to the public space of the Inn. By that time the bodies had been buried; Mrs. Novelli’s in a grave shared with her husband in Prestwich Church and Alexander Novelli’s (as befitted a suicide) in a common grave at Stand. Materially disposed of, the corpses nevertheless retained a potent discursive reality, through the operation of the law and the publication of its proceedings. As the newspaper accounts layered the evidence of the two coroner’s court hearings over the initial details gleaned by journalists in the neighborhood, the reader came to know a fair amount about Harriet Novelli’s body. It was found lying on its left side, with its feet toward the fireplace and its head toward the door, in an “easy posture” with its legs slightly apart and its arm stretched out. Beside it was a table on which the cloth had been displaced and with an antimacassar from the chair beneath it. She was wearing the dress she had worn earlier in the day, but her handkerchief had been removed and the dress was unfastened at the back.
The pin of a broach had been bent out of shape. Despite all this “the countenance was placid” and early examinations did not disclose the bruising on her throat. At first poison was suspected (a glass of brandy and water had been consumed by someone) and the authority of medical examination was required to disperse this supposition, and in so doing brought a great deal more of Mrs. Novelli’s corpse into imaginary and discursive view. There were no “marks of violence” elsewhere than on her neck, testified Dr. Ainsworth—evidence which of course required the removal of clothing. Thumbprints on the windpipe and the state of the blood vessels of the lungs, neck, and heart indicated death by strangulation. This conclusion required the opening of the chest cavity and skull. There was no trace of poison in the contents of her stomach, which resembled pea soup and had a sour smell. In response to direct questioning (from Edmund Costan), surgeon Mr. Harris gave “in the strongest terms his opinion as a medical man” that she had not had sexual intercourse on the evening of her murder, nor was she pregnant. We must therefore assume that his opinion as a medical man was based on physical examination.

If the corpse is eloquent here, exactly what is it saying? Thomas Laqueur argues that by this period, specific corpses were scrutinized in the medicolegal record, not as signifiers inscribed with religiously derived markers of grace or sin, but in their detail, particularity, and materiality, as human bodies in their own right. Such medicolegal discourses were productive of a gesture of humanitarian empathy in the reader and at the same time a movement toward some possibility of improvement of the human condition. The gaze was directed to a specific, known body, sickening or dead, saturated with recognizably human suffering, which required progressive, rational even political activity to decipher and address the causes. The Victorian middle classes, of course, had very firm (if debated) ideas about the causes of bodily suffering and (particularly in regard to the bodies of the poor) deployed extensive energies to address them through philanthropy, remoralization, local government, and the political lobbying of central government.

The newspaper took care to detail the evidence of the physical cause of Harriet Novelli’s suffering (strangulation by hands around her windpipe, which bruised her neck and “engorged” the vessels of her brain, neck, and lungs with dark venous blood). But it also used her body—externally, in its disposition and appearance and internally through the postmortem examination evidence—as a text to decipher her mental and emotional condition and question her chastity and probity. Her eventual vindication as a tragic figure was secured only once her potential culpability and fragile sexual and moral reputation had been extensively canvassed. One must surely assume that the allegedly “placid” countenance is a fictional signifier of respectability; the
physical processes of strangulation are not conducive to calm facial expression. Victorian ideals of genteel femininity required the careful regulation of facial and bodily comportment. For this reason, the “easy posture,” the outflung arm and the slightly open legs, produced suspicions—signified the possibility of a compromised woman—which with the discovery of the unfastened dress, unlaced boots and discarded handkerchief grew into questions, only eventually settled at the reconvened inquest, after several days of rumor and speculation. It was all very well for the *Manchester Courier* to assert that “we cannot account for the unfastening of the dress except upon a supposition which makes the affair still more hideous; we shall not further allude to it.”13 That remark by itself necessarily did all kinds of imaginary work in the minds of its readers.

Thus, largely following the work of Mary Poovey, this corpse (I would argue) was enabled to recuperate Harriet Novelli’s reputation, but only after a process whereby the medicolegal gaze first scrutinized and then formulated judgments on the evidence yielded by her body.14 Harriet Novelli had been a woman from a “wealthy family” in “affluent circumstances.” Her class position and the tropes of bourgeois femininity which attached to it nevertheless did not excuse her body from this kind of imaginary and actual display, though they may have contributed to the vigor with which her male defenders, principally Edmund Costan, questioned the doctor to secure her vindication. The Manchester commercial and manufacturing elite was a self-conscious and cohesive if not undifferentiated “social formation,” for whom business and public probity were not divorced from domestic concerns.15 So foundational was home and family to middle-class *mores* that the Novelli “tragedy” had a wider significance than its implications for one family. That such extensive violence could occur so suddenly and easily within the sanctified precincts of the middle-class home questioned the social and cultural underpinnings of Manchester middle-class respectability, not to mention the reputation of Higher Broughton as a developing suburb. And this in itself I think is important in defining the composite nature of the gaze fixed upon the corpse of Harriet Novelli. She was looked at not only by the doctors but also by the coroner’s jury, and imaginatively by the readership of the newspaper (male and female) that consumed these melodramatic revelations. The comparative informality and immediacy of the structure and proceedings of the coroners’ court facilitated this level of participation. The newspaper reporter’s investigations and the retailing of “our own impression after carefully considering the facts we have collected” shaped the publicly presented narrative.16 But more than this, the selection of jury members in the comparatively small neighborhood of Broughton meant that witnesses and interested parties were also called upon to serve on the jury. In particular, Edward Costan, key
witness, discoverer of the body and cross-examiner of the medical witness, was also a family friend and coexecutor of Harriet's husband's will. The position of her body on discovery is given on his evidence. Note the mixture of observation, recollection, and hearsay in his testimony:

She had the same dress on as when at my house, with the exception of the cuffs. Her dress was unfastened at the back, as though she had been preparing for bed. . . . I should say Mrs. Novelli had taken some brandy and water as she usually did before going to bed.17

The Domestic Sphere and Local Society

Of course, other interested and knowledgeable observers had no voice in the journalistic account. The women of the respectable social networks of church and visiting and taking tea must have been close observers of the relationship between brother and sister-in-law and doubtless constituted part of the readership of the newspaper articles. Elizabeth Gaskell, the novelist, wrote to a friend in London (who would of course have only seen the less sympathetic London papers): “such a tragedy here yesterday, which you will see in the papers. We knew Mrs. Novelli! She was a Madonna-like person with a face (and character I believe) full of thought and gentle love.”18 Thus Mrs. Gaskell, too, was ready to read character from physical appearance. The Novellis seemed the ideal middle-class family, underpinned by gender differentiation in familial roles. Mrs. Novelli’s beauty was the counterpart to her husband’s money, apparent business success and cultivated taste. Harriet Novelli came from a Lancashire textile family. It is likely that she was an only child, born some nine years after her parent’s marriage. Her father, Richard Hall, was a calico printer from Tottington, near Bury.19 He could style himself as a “gent[leman]” on his daughter’s marriage certificate, but at her birth, he is recorded as a mere shopkeeper. Although occupational attributions are not always reliable indicators of material substance, the Halls, though affluent, were perhaps less well heeled than the Novellis.20 The marriage, apparently an advantageous match from the point of view of the Halls, nevertheless conforms to the common pattern in textile families; where immigrants tended to ground themselves in regional association, and where marriages were endogamous, both by class and by region.21

The Novellis had been fully part of Manchester middle-class society. Despite their apparent Italian ancestry there is no discoverable indication of Catholicism in the available sources. In Prestwich, they took part in charitable and philanthropic activity in Prestwich parish.
householders they contributed to the Infants’ School (£2 in 1847–48), Lewis Novelli added his two guineas to the all-male subscription list for the church choir and Mrs. Novelli subscribed ten shillings to the Girls’ Clothing Club and a guinea to the Ladies Charity (apparently a lying-in charity). Lewis Novelli served as parish overseer in 1845. Most notably, he had left £1,000 in his will to establish an educational charity in Prestwich, to be administered by trustees drawn from among the major ratepayers and the parish clergy. The Novellis were resolutely attached to the Established church. The house to which Mrs. Novelli moved in Higher Broughton was also very close to the parish church. Religious subjects by Renaissance Italian artists featured pre-dominately among those in Lewis Novelli’s will, and legatees included Manchester friends and colleagues including the Prestwich curate and his wife. A copy of a Raphael “Madonna” was left in trust to hang in the Prestwich Rectory.

Novelli’s collection also included English painters of the period. There was a landscape by Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois, an “Orphelia” and a “Juliet” by the water-colorist, John Bostock, and Novelli left two pictures by Manchester artist William Knight Keeling. One of these, a “Gil Blas” left to his brother Alexander, had been exhibited at the Royal Academy. Keeling had been leading figure in the 1823 foundation of the Royal Manchester Institution for the Promotion of Literature, Science and Art, and was later its President (1864–77). Lewis Novelli had paid the £42 subscription to become a hereditary governor of the Manchester Institution. Thus Lewis Novelli was not only a businessman, but also a member of the Manchester bourgeois elite in a wider sense and, judging by what can be gleaned of his home surroundings, was an exemplar of the domestic middle-class masculinity that John Tosh has defined as characteristic of the period.

Both Prestwich and Higher Broughton were by the 1830s established as middle-class suburbs, providing the Manchester men with a pleasant living environment a carriage ride away from the polluted, overcrowded city center populated by the poor bloody infantry of early industrialization. These neighboring parishes northwest of Salford were a few miles out of town via the Bury New Road (opened in 1827). Prestwich had a population of over four thousand in 1851, but working and manufacturing households concentrated in the central settlement, leaving many airy, semirural locations for the houses of the middle class. In 1780 Broughton had been almost entirely rural; its population in 1801 had numbered 866. It had acquired its church only in 1836 and by 1851 it had a population of 7,126. Higher Broughton in particular comprised new developments of large villas along and near to the Bury New Road. The marked spatial residential segregation of early-Victorian Manchester was highly class based. In 1842 it could be said that “Ardwick
(or indeed Broughton) knows less about Ancoats than it does about China." But if Ancoats was out of the sight of the leafy environs of Broughton it was hardly out of mind. The Manchester middle classes at mid-century were still vulnerable to the vagaries of a turbulent early industrial economy and of course much exercised about the subversive and seditious potential as well as the moral and sanitary condition of the multiplying numbers of the laboring poor. In January 1850 the “Hungry 40s” were barely past. In 1847–48 the Manchester Guardians had to assist an additional 17,000 souls, some 56,000 in total, and the slump “was not finally overcome until 1853.” If family was of both practical importance to the middle classes as well as of symbolic and cultural value, the disruption of idealized family norms by the Novelli deaths surely resonated with wider social anxieties in respectable Broughton and Manchester society. The Manchester Guardian was careful to mention that Alexander Novelli was “not in business” and “in no way connected” with the family firm: its financial credit and business probity were jeopardized by the scandal as doubtless were those of all its creditors.

The Novellis and the Manchester Business Community

Lewis Novelli had made his will in 1844, when he was in his early thirties. This was probably the year that his father retired to London, so the will was a gesture made by a man not contemplating early death, but the possibility of a growing family and his own future as the head of the firm of Messrs. Novelli and Albanelli, merchants of Bond St and later Tib Street. As well as Alexander Novelli and Edmund Costan, his executors were his partner, Charles Albanelli, and two other Manchester businessmen.

There had been a handful of Italian bankers, merchants, and woolworkers in Manchester in the sixteenth century, and by the 1820s there were a number of Italian craftsmen established in city-center workshops. By the mid-1830s poorer Italian immigrants, particularly the street musicians and hurdy-gurdy men “who infest the streets with box organs,” were a recognized (and policed) feature of Manchester street life. Thus, to be “Italian” in mid-nineteenth-century Manchester could have meant a number of things, not all of them positive. Through their business, social, and domestic life, their control and ownership of material possessions, and their patterns of consumption, the Novellis systematically adopted the social and cultural characteristics of the city’s commercial and manufacturing elite. The firm of Novelli was well established in Manchester by 1850. Lewis Novelli’s father, Philip, had lived at Clarendon House in Cheetham Hill, with business premises at 23–5 York
Street, Manchester in 1834. Alexander Novelli had gone to school in Manchester, remembered as a nervous and withdrawn boy by his schoolfellow, John Hampson, later the Novelli family solicitor. Philip Novelli sat as one of the directors of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce from at least 1839 until 1844, where he was a fairly regular attender (though less assiduous than key figures such as Richard Cobden). Both Lewis and Philip Novelli attended the Special General Meeting in 1840 that petitioned for the repeal of the Corn Laws. Unsurprisingly the Novellis were free traders. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce, though smaller than the Exchange and counting more merchants than manufacturers among its members, was a vital and recognized voice for Manchester trading and commercial interests.

The Manchester middle class is now being shown to have been more diverse than was once assumed. Although around 80 percent of Manchester mill owners were from Lancashire, the wider commercial middle class including merchants and the professions had a somewhat different profile, containing a minority of immigrants including Germans, Italians, and Jews. Export markets were crucial to the growth of Manchester textiles. By the late-eighteenth century several Manchester textile firms had representatives abroad and by that period some fifteen foreign merchants were living and working in Manchester. The increasing complexity of trade after the Napoleonic wars led to greater specialization as between merchants, manufacturers, and those who, as acceptance houses, concentrated on finance rather than dealing in goods. The comparatively slow and late development of banking in Lancashire meant that merchant houses with their frequent London and Liverpool connections and good knowledge of particular foreign markets were important to trade where long and extensive credit terms and seismic market fluctuations rapidly undermined capital and undid reputations. The majority were German or German Jewish, and the largest had trading offices around the world. By 1840 Manchester had eighty-four German merchants, nine Greeks (i.e., from the Ottoman empire), and seventeen others. There were several Greek merchants and one Spanish living in Higher Broughton in 1851. A medium-sized merchant firm commanded capital of over £100,000 around midcentury, much more than most manufacturing establishments. Lewis Novelli’s executors paid trade debts of over £60,000 in settling his estate and his will created trusts to the capital value of £6,400 as well as disposing of what must have been a pretty extensive residual personal estate. His father Philip, whose will was proved in 1852, left a considerable amount, including an absolute bequest of £50,000 to his surviving son, Augustus Novelli.

The Novellis had business interests in Italy and the Middle East. Charles Albanelli, Lewis’s partner and executor, came from Milan. In 1840, Philip’s expertise on Italian markets was called upon by the Manchester Chamber of
Commerce to draft a memorial to the Board of Trade putting forward the Manchester interest in the debate over new import duties into the “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies,” which particularly disadvantaged Manchester handkerchief pieces compared to German-made items.39 Lewis had acted as banker to Ibrahim Pasha, of Egypt, the son of Muhammad Ali who had detached Egypt from the Ottoman empire, establishing its own Middle Eastern empire and inaugurating programs of selective reform, industrialization (including cotton textile production), and military and naval expansion.40 Western Europe had viewed these developments with some anxiety in the 1820s.41 In the longer term, these fears proved to be unfounded. Egyptian textile production never turned an effective profit and Muhammad Ali’s finances were heavily overstretched by the late 1830s. Egyptian production of raw cotton never dominated the English market.42 During the boom of 1835–36 plenty of Manchester men made a killing on Egyptian cotton, though losing out in the subsequent slump was also a real possibility.43 Consequently, Egypt and the Middle East was a live issue for the Manchester men in the 1830s and 1840s. So the possibilities of anything but reliability and creditworthiness in a leading merchant house with Egyptian interests would certainly have been of concern to the Manchester commercial public.

The Middle-Class Family

Gender historians have demonstrated that the “social imaginary” of the nineteenth-century family provided templates through which people organized and conceptualized their relationships of “blood, contract and intimacy.”44 This imaginary depended on “boundaries and binaries of gender, class and indeed separations between the English and other races.”45 The notion of a move to a far more “privatized” “nuclear” bourgeois family centered on the heterosexual couple by midcentury is being revised and the role of kin outside the “nuclear” model of parents and children is being rethought.46 There was heavy romantic cultural investment in sibling relationships as being both an emotionally intimate but also an asexual realization of the “almost compulsive focus on contrasting masculine and feminine categories, at a time when these attributes were integral to bourgeois identity.”47 Notwithstanding, adult sibling or in-law relationships remained potentially vulnerable to sexual attraction. Hence the decades-long controversy from 1835 over marriage between a widower and his deceased wife’s sister. Elisabeth Gruner emphasizes that in both the parliamentary debates and political pamphlets and literary use of the device, the core debate was less about the suitability of a widower’s marriage
to his sister-in-law but more about the possibility of sexual attraction between these parties during the wife’s lifetime. 48

“Deceased wife’s sister” also had implications for the key role of family as a welfare system for dependent kin and children; as remarrying widowers argued, what better replacement mother and housekeeper for a mourned wife was there, than her own unmarried sister? Middle-class family property ownership was socially embedded and gendered and involved a web of obligations as well as rights, made ever more complex by systems of partible inheritance. Philip Novelli’s will made provision not only for his grandchildren (Lewis and Harriet’s children) but also provided annuities for several other more distant relations by marriage. Siblings and in-laws were part of the social and property holding network of the middle-class family, but their claims threatened to divide family property. As Eleanor Gordon and others have pointed out, middle-class women were not excluded from holding significant and potentially substantial amounts of property. 49 Nevertheless, their role was essentially as custodians or caretakers of that property. They were denied absolute ownership, in the interests of the family. Neither Philip nor Lewis Novelli left property absolutely to female relations. Harriet Novelli was left household goods and the interest on an investment of £5,000, but only during her life or widowhood. However, neither were men entirely autonomous agents. The third Novelli brother, Augustus, eventually inherited absolutely the bulk of the Novelli fortune from his father, but took on the obligation of bringing up his orphaned niece and nephew. Men had gendered obligations as protectors and providers to look to the welfare needs of family, particularly wives and children. 50 In some ways a match between Harriet and Alexander Novelli would have appropriately secured the Novelli family property, some of which might otherwise reenter the circulations of wealth in the middle-class Manchester marriage market. Harriet was an affluent and attractive young widow. Although the direct legacy left to her was due to cease with her widowhood, her possible remarriage may well have been something that the Novellis would have wished to broker. Although we do not know the terms of the settlement, the house in Higher Broughton had been bought for her by her father-in-law, rather than being paid for from her husband’s estate. Although “deceased wife’s sister” is not the same thing as marriage to a deceased husband’s brother (a relationship about which the Victorians were far less exercised), the controversy still “interrogates masculine desire” and was in part about the ways that the Victorian family required restraint of desire from men. 51 There were particular ways in which a widow/brother-in-law relationship could tap into recurrent Victorian fears of “frenzied passions,” and the Novelli case articulates these in an acute form because they are allied to madness and, perhaps, to miscegenation.
Chapter 11

Madness and the Masculine Corpse

There were, of course, two corpses in this case and Alexander Novelli's also had the potential for revelation. However, what we know about his body is more limited than that of his sister-in-law, practically because no postmortem was carried out and also because the aspect of Alexander Novelli that the court and newspapers were keen to probe was his mind. The body was suspended, but with its feet on the ground, the dressing gown cord having stretched. It was still warm. We know that he died in his trousers and shirt, that he had received a scratch on his nose, that he had left the marks of his boots on the sofa in the dining room and that he had vomited on the dining room carpet and over his clothes. But we don't know his facial expression, his corpse is never unclothed, and we have no information about the condition of his internal organs. The evidence as to the state of his mind is surmised by the fact of the murder and from peripheral evidence. His lawyer described his odd behavior on a recent visit about his brother's estate. The carpenter who did some work on the Broughton house had found him agitated. A correspondent had recounted information derived from a third party that Alexander had once tried to hang himself when on a visit to Augsburg. His family history was also introduced. His mother was insane and had been confined. Two of his brothers had committed suicide and his sister was not in a fit state of mind; her “unfortunate condition” was mentioned in both her brother's and her father's wills. Although it remained a crime, by this period insanity rather than sin was increasingly seen as the cause of suicide. Insanity “was lurking in the blood—a fatal inheritance of the family” and when, the journalist surmised, a renewed proposal of marriage was rejected, suddenly “reason had forsaken its throne [and] the act was perpetrated in the height of the paroxysm.” In the decades before Freud, individuals who did not comply with normative family roles could be the more easily adjudged mad and confined, and asylums laid their claims to cure on their “family-like” regimes. In this case, of course, there was arguably role confusion between that of brother-in-law and potential husband as well as an inability on Alexander Novelli’s part to act out the tropes of respectable bourgeois masculinity. At the age where Alexander Novelli could be expected to have the kind of business and family life of his brother, he could achieve neither; arguably the kind of lifecycle crisis that Victor Bailey sees as a frequent precipitant of suicide.

Victorian middle-class masculinity depended on autonomy and the ability to govern both other individuals and material possessions. Madness feminized male subjects because it fractured their autonomy; the implication seems to be (given the apparent sanity of Philip, Lewis, and Augustus Novelli) that madness has stolen into the Novelli family through the maternal line. The ini-
tial suspicion was that Harriet had been poisoned and poison was a woman's weapon deployed within the domestic sphere. Contemporary cultural representations repeatedly depicted suicide as a feminine act, despite the higher number of successful male suicides. Alexander Novelli was a subject whose masculinity was compromised by overlapping inadequacies. He was subject to occasional odd behavior. The way was open for him to take an active role in the family business, but he declined and a man, after all, “must act.” He was unable to cope with the demands of acting as his brother’s executor, becoming agitated and distressed at the administration involved. His fascination with phrenology associated him with a practice that by this date had lost its radical and progressive currency in middle-class circles. He was unable to achieve his objective of marriage and (we assume) sexual relations with Harriet. Incestuous sexual advances and excess of passion were unmanly and un-English. Insanity tainted the blood of the Novellis, blood that was already “other” through its foreign connections and associations. Despite their integration into the Manchester commercial elite, the disintegration of Novelli family probity and discretion through the circumstances of the murder and suicide was (once Harriet Novelli had been vindicated) visited upon Alexander (or rather upon the madness within him) as the threatening “other”; a category repeatedly racialized as well as gendered in nineteenth-century discourse. Thus “family” among the Novellis became pernicious and destabilizing, rather than affective, ordered, and stable. Connections of blood of course articulated both family and nation; miscegenation was an anxiety around the simultaneous rupturing of both these boundaries. Conventional assumptions of feminine beauty may allow us to read Harriet Novelli’s “considerable personal attractions” as signifying whiteness. We know nothing about Alexander Novelli’s appearance, perhaps a speaking silence. We know through the postmortem examination of Harriet Novelli’s corpse that she was not carrying her brother-in-law’s child. However, she was already twice a mother. If insanity was the “fatal inheritance” of the Novellis, remaining dormant until moments of (certainly in this case) heightened passion caused by sexual and emotional desire, in January 1850 a question mark surely remained over the futures of Harriet’s two children.

Insane passions had produced the disordered and distressing corpses that defaced the Novelli home, clashing with the elegance and comfort of its decoration and furnishings. Women’s responsibilities at whatever level for the ordering and maintenance of the domestic environment of family life was about the regulation of boundaries expressed through the control of disorder and pollution. As Davidoff argues, “Women’s ‘physical, intellectual, even emotional work’ in maintaining such boundaries ‘enabled the public and intellectual self-realization of higher status men.’” To the contemporary local
readership, did Harriet Novelli’s rejection of her brother-in-law’s proposal of marriage constitute an inappropriate refusal of legitimate male protection, preferring the independence of wealthy widowhood and provoking his latent insanity to the surface? Or was it an entirely proper and feminine assertion of the asexual relationship between brother and sister-in-law? Were the seeds of the “tragedy” sown long before that Sunday, in fact on 27 February 1841 at Saint Mary’s Church, Bury, Lancashire, England when twenty-one-year-old Miss Harriet Hall first married into the tainted blood of the Novellis?

Conclusion

Through one particular and well-publicized murder, this essay has taken up the concerns of current research in gender and crime history to review how the murdered body of a young, highly respectable, middle-class widow was used, both in the comparatively informal and local context of the coroners’ court hearing and before a local and a national newspaper readership, as a surface on which to inscribe a romantic and speculative narrative of compromised respectability and fractured domesticity. The evidence of friends and servants, couched in discourses of neighborliness and sociability, was juxtaposed with the forensic assessment of medical witnesses, but both groups fixed their gaze upon a detailed examination of Harriet Novelli’s corpse, scrutinizing it both externally and (through the postmortem) internally, seeking for it to yield up its own narratives about pregnancy, illicit and almost incessant sexual activity, excessive alcohol consumption, or, indeed, poison. The body of her brother-in-law and murderer, however, was less at issue than the state of his mind. His foreign ancestry and personal and family history of mental instability combined with hearsay evidence of his (illicit) sexual attraction to his recently widowed sister-in-law called into question both his sanity and his manliness, but thereby also his criminal responsibility. If the closure and chastity of middle-class femininity could be rendered precarious by the medicolegal scrutiny of a woman’s body, then masculine probity could be undermined by the feminizing influences of an un-British mental instability.

Notes


5. Lancaster Guardian, 26 January 1850; Manchester Courier, 26 January 1850.


7. LRO, Broughton Census, Cliff House, Broughton, John C. Grundy, printer, publisher, and guilder, aet. 44.

8. The Times, 22 January 1850; 23 January 1850; 25 January 1850.


11. Manchester Courier, 26 January 1850.


16. Lancaster Guardian, 26 January 1850.

17. Manchester Courier, 26 January 1850.


20. There is no Prerogative Court of Canterbury will for Richard Hall, where wills of the wealthier were generally proved, nor at the Archdeaconry of Chester. Possibly it was proved at the Archdiocese of York.

21. Howe, Cotton Masters, 76.

22. MCL, M6/59/5, Archdeacon’s Visitations for Prestwich, 15–17; Middleton, Annals, 68.


24. Dictionary of National Biography; A. Graves, A Dictionary of Artists Who Have


30. MCL, M6/59/5, Archdeacon’s Visitations for Prestwich, 18, 19, 108, for a reproduction of the Raphael, correspondence over its transfer and a clipping of the Manchester Courier coverage of the murder. See Manchester and Salford Directory, 1841; Slater’s Directory, 1848; Manchester and Salford Directory, 1851.


33. MCL, M/8/2/4, Manchester Chamber of Commerce Proceedings, 1, 13, 17, 39, 62–64, 166, 318.

34. Ibid., 39.


39. MCL, M/8/2/4, Manchester Chamber of Commerce Proceedings, 62 (19 August 1840); 63 (25 August 1840); 64.


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42. N. Longmate, *The Hungry Mills*, 214, 224.
51. K. Robb, “Circe in Crinoline.”
54. The future of the boy is unclear. Louise was bought up by her uncle Augustus in London, marrying H. C. Grove in 1869.
56. LRO, Bury St. Mary Marriage Registers, 27 February 1841, Harriet Hall, dtr Richard Hall and Lewis Novelli, gent, of Kersall Hall, Manchester, witnessed by Anne Walmsley, John Hall, Jn. [sic] Hall, P. Novelli, C. Albanelli.