Medea's Daughters
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THERE IS NO shortage of criminological, scientific, legal, and medical discourse on the cause and effect of criminal behavior in women during the nineteenth century. The works of Havelock Ellis, William Acton, Cesare Lombroso, and Luke Owen Pike illustrate the Victorian compulsion to decipher and control the deviant woman. Conversely, no other period has so clearly articulated the characteristics and qualities of the “good” woman as Victorian-era Britain. For all the political and scientific discourse on gender in Victorian culture, the Victorian stage showed little evidence of the cultural struggle to clarify gender expectations and to contain and control those men and women who eluded them. This chapter will examine the absence of the woman who kills on the Victorian stage, and through that absence attempt to understand how the theater participated in the construction of both the ideal and the criminal woman.

Though “fallen women” can be found in many popular melodramas of the period, women who committed crimes that might actually be tried in a court of law were rarely represented on stage. Although some of the popular highwaymen plays (most notably Jack Sheppard) starred actresses in trouser roles, in the theater women were the victims of crimes, not the perpetrators. While the fallen woman, or the adventuress as she was sometimes called, may have been the epitome of female sexual corruption, the
melodramatic heroine symbolized idealized womanhood and as such was incapable of violent or criminal behavior.

Satire can often provide a more penetrating view of a theatrical phenomenon than traditional sources such as scripts, reviews, and memoirs. Nineteenth-century humorist and actor Jerome K. Jerome describes how the two diametrically opposed images of womanhood, the heroine and the villainess, were embodied on the Victorian stage. He admits to being rather bored with the heroine, whose constant state of crisis causes her to “weep a great deal”:

She is very good, is the Stage heroine. The comic man expresses the belief that she is a born angel . . .

“Oh no,” she says (sadly of course), “I have many faults.”

We rather wish that she would show them a little more. Her excessive goodness seems somehow to pall on us. Our only consolation, while watching her, is that there are not that many good women off the stage. Life is bad enough, as it is; if there were many women, in real life, as good as the Stage heroine, it would be unbearable.

Jerome finds the adventuress far more appealing. She “sits on tables and smokes cigarettes” and never demands to be “unhanded.” Though he is being decidedly ironic, Jerome’s description of the adventuress makes it clear that she is the antithesis of the loving wife and mother. He even jokes about her casual commission of infanticide:

There is a good deal to be said in favor of the Adventuress. True, she possesses rather too much sarcasm and repartee to make things quite agreeable round the domestic hearth . . . ; but, taken on the whole she is decidedly attractive. She has grit and go in her. She is alive. She can do something to help herself besides calling for “George.” She has not got a Stage child—if she ever had one, she has left it on someone else’s doorstep, which, presuming there was no water handy to drown it in, seems to be about the most sensible thing she could have done with it.

Jerome makes another observation that is very telling; he declares that the adventuress “is generally of foreign extraction. They do not make bad women in England, the article is entirely of continental manufacture and has to be imported.”

With Jerome’s satiric image in my mind, in this chapter I examine why Victorian society was so invested in the belief that “they do not make bad women in England” and how, when real English women did commit
crimes, the stage either ignored them or reformed them. As a case in point we’ll look at the dramatic life, death, and rebirth of Mary Edmondson, a young woman executed at Tyburn in 1759 for the murder of her aunt. Like that of Alice Arden, her story was later dramatized and performed for the entertainment and edification of a middle-class audience. But unlike Alice Arden, who was one of many real-life women whose crimes were reenacted in ballads and plays, Mary Edmondson was the only living British murderess to be directly represented on the commercial London stage during the nineteenth century.

British playwrights often turned to true crime stories for source material; some notable criminals who were popular on the Victorian stage include Dick Turpin, Robert Macaire, Jack Sheppard, Jonathon Wild, Sixteen String Jack, Guy Fawkes, Paul Clifford, and Claude Duval.6 Despite the popularity of male criminals, I am aware of only three nineteenth-century British plays that portray real women who had been accused of murdering a member of their own family. Of these three protagonists, two were foreigners and as such were sufficiently “different” from the audience members’ own wives and daughters. The fifteenth-century Italian Lucretia Borgia, an alleged poisoner, was a popular stage villainess and appeared in many incarnations. A French woman, Marie LaFarge, was convicted of poisoning her husband and provided the basis for the Adelphi Theatre’s Lafarge; or, Self-Will in Women. The only convicted British murderess represented on the Victorian stage was Mary Edmondson. Though she was undoubtedly British born, she was also separated from her audience by over one hundred years, and as we shall see, the dramatic representation of her crime is so severely altered as to be nearly unrecognizable.

As with Alice, to fully understand the implications of Mary’s crime and punishment we first need a brief overview of the idealized Victorian woman and the “Angel in the House.” Though 15 percent of British women reached their fiftieth birthday having never wed,7 the idealized Victorian woman was Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House,” who in “a rapture of submission” gladly sequestered herself in the home while her husband spoke and acted for her in the public world.8 Patmore’s celebrated poem extols the virtue of separate sexual spheres, a notion central to Victorian gender relations. According to this doctrine, women were to live inside the home, overseeing household matters in a comfortable cult of domesticity. There they would raise the children and create a nurturing space for their husbands, who in return toiled for the family’s welfare in the outside world of work and politics. Though coverture still erased a wife’s legal identity, the cult of domesticity invested her with an alternate self-image, a clearly defined role as the moral guardian of the
home. But this new identity came at a high cost. By elevating the cultural status of a woman who performed the expected duties of wife and mother, the notion of separate spheres allowed men to justify the absence of women's rights in the public sphere.

The nineteenth-century married woman had few legal rights. Coverture still insured that not only did she lose her identity as a legal subject separate from her husband, she also forfeited all claim to any property she may have brought into the marriage. Despite the Victorian praise of motherhood, actual mothers had very few rights when it came to custody of their children. If a woman left a marriage for any reason, including abuse, she had no legitimate claim to her children, who were considered to be the legal property of her husband.

The punishment awaiting the woman who left her marriage could be seen on almost any given night on stage in one of the most popular dramas of the century, *East Lynne*. Isabel, the fallen woman who (for reasons that today would seem rather logical) abandons her husband and child, was a favorite role for leading actresses of the period; however, the popularity of the fallen woman on stage should not be interpreted as a willingness on the part of Victorian audiences to accept alternate standards of acceptable feminine behavior. Isabel does not offer a model of resistance to the Victorian woman but rather reinforces gender prescriptions by showing the devastating effects of leaving the domestic sphere. Disgraced and living in sin with the man who lures her from her marriage, Isabel warns other women not to make the mistakes she has made. This speech, recited thousands of times upon the Victorian stage, can be read as a virtual manifesto for wifely subservience:

ISABEL: Alas! what is to be the end of my sufferings? How much longer can I bear this torture of mind, this never-dying anguish of soul? From what a dream have I awakened! O lady, wife, mother! whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the nature, the endurance of woman to bear, yet resolve to bear them. Fall down on your knees and pray for patience; pray for strength to resist that demon who would tempt you to accept them. Bear them unto death rather than forget your good name and your good conscience. Oh! I have sacrificed husband, home, children, friends, and all that make life of value to woman—and for what? To be forever an outcast from society, to never again know a moment’s peace. Oh! that I could die and end my suffering and misery.⁹

Fallen women like Isabel posed no threat to the ideological construct of the natural wife and mother. For onstage, at least, these women always repented
and, like Isabel, warned other rebellious women not to stray from the path of wifely virtue. These fallen women could titillate without threatening the stability of the Victorian home, for they always died (either by their own hand or by the ravages of grief and guilt), essentially proving that a woman who is not a wife and mother might just as well be dead. Lying in her forgiving husband’s arms, the fallen woman makes an obligatory speech of repentance before she dies. Thus is she reabsorbed into the cult of domesticity, and the Victorian construction of the ideal woman carries on unchallenged.

In addition to legal constraints, medical and religious discourses also exalted women as morally superior but intellectually, biologically, and psychologically inferior. The highly respected Dr. William Acton writes that women were biologically constructed to bear children and that intense intellectual activity would drain blood from their reproductive system, perhaps even causing cancer of the womb. Not only could an education erode a woman’s womb, it could rot her soul as well. In *History of Crime in England* (published 1873–1876) historian Luke Owen Pike writes, “it follows that, so far as crime is determined by external circumstances, every step made by a woman towards her independence is a step towards that precipice at the bottom of which lies a prison.” Pike effectively criminalized female independence by claiming that the more active and energetic a woman was the more apt she was to become a felon. By fashioning the ideal Victorian woman as an angel in the house, the culture implied that those women found roaming around outside had gone to the devil.

### The Victorian Murderess

The angel in the house, exclusively adapted to housekeeping and childbearing, may have been the idealized woman of the era, but she was hardly natural. Between 1855 and 1874 women were charged with nearly 40 percent of the murders committed in England and over half were ultimately convicted. If the fiction of “natural” female submission and passivity was to be maintained, women capable of lashing out with violence against those they were supposed to protect must somehow be accounted for or explained away. The murderous woman was living proof that women were not submissive and altruistic by nature, and this provided a conundrum for those who maintained the “rightness” of separate spheres.

The murderers presented the Victorians with a particularly vexing dilemma, for she had not only broken the law but she had, more problematically, violated the cultural code of womanhood. Most women accused of murder in this period had killed a member of their own family; this was an
action virtually unexplainable if one accepted the culturally constructed notion of femininity in the Victorian age. In Victorian criminology the myth of the morally superior and politically inferior woman was maintained by espousing this simple but elegant solution: women are not capable of criminal behavior, so if a woman does commit a crime she is not really a woman.

In Criminal Women, Victorian sociologist M. E. Owen expressed the common belief that it was impossible for a woman to commit a criminal act and remain a woman in the true sense of the word:

The man’s nature may be said to be hardened, the woman’s destroyed. Women of this stamp are generally so bold and unblushing in crime, so indifferent to right and wrong, so lost to all sense of shame, so destitute of the instincts of womanhood, that they may be more justly compared to wild beasts than to women. . . . Criminal women, as a class, are found to be more civilized than the savage, more degraded than the slave, less true to all natural and womanly instincts than the untutored squaw of a North American tribe.13

The murderess was denaturalized, distanced from the “real” wives and daughters of the empire by emphasizing all of her masculine (and non-European) qualities. The first attack on the criminal woman’s femininity was often directed at her physical appearance. Many sociologists and physiognomists believed that criminal women possessed masculine characteristics, which clearly marked them as deviant. The most concise document on female criminal physiognomy in the nineteenth century is Cesare Lombroso’s Female Offender, published in 1898. Though he claims to analyze only outward appearances, Lombroso inevitably bases his conclusions on cultural beliefs about what is or is not “feminine.” His theories are surrounded by charts, measurements, percentages, and photographs all verifying the scientific “authenticity” of his gendered assumptions.14 To the criminal woman Lombroso attributes, to varying degrees, small stature, above-average weight, inferior cranial capacity, receding forehead, enormous lower jaw, projecting cheekbones, projecting ears, anomalous teeth, hairy moles, a deep voice, dark hair (with a tendency toward early grayness), dark eyes, and premature baldness. He adds that “the female assassin has most often a virile and Mongolian type of face.”15

Lombroso concluded that women who had been convicted of murdering their husbands were “striking examples of having the bodies of women, but all the air of brutal men: whom they resemble sometimes, even in their dress.”16 In his pseudoscience any woman who does not appear or act sufficiently feminine is endowed with a criminal nature.
Older women, masculine women, and unattractive women—all possess criminal physiognomy in Lombrosian categories. Their masculine qualities (deep voices and hairy bodies) are outer proof of their polluted inner nature. Their feminine purity has been diluted with the atavistic qualities of non-European men.

One cannot separate the pseudoscience of criminal physiognomy from the ideological frame that produced it. Rather than creating the idea of assigning criminal characteristics to “masculine” women, the physiognomists were simply codifying the prejudices and fears of their culture. Even the discourse of sociology, which claimed to offer a dispassionate, scientific view of societal relations, was unable to distinguish documented fact from cultural beliefs. In his book on criminology, Victorian social theorist Have- lock Ellis calls upon traditional wisdom to support his assertion that all criminal women possessed masculine attributes: “I have already frequently had occasion to note approximation of criminal women in physical character to ordinary men. This has always been more or less carefully recorded in popular proverbs and in the records of criminal trials” (emphasis mine).17

A positivist, Ellis is reluctant to claim that women’s passivity and high moral nature are God given, and so by using the theories of Charles Darwin, he is able to explain, “scientifically,” why women are less criminal than men. He begins by equating an “unfeminine” appearance with a criminal and degenerate nature, and then claims that unattractive women do not marry or reproduce and therefore do not pass on their criminal natures to future generations. “Masculine, unsexed, ugly, abnormal women—the woman that is, most strongly marked with the signs of degeneration, and therefore the tendency to criminality—would be to a large extent passed by in the choice of a mate, and would tend to be eliminated.”18

Sometimes social theorists like Ellis had to go to ridiculous lengths to make reality correspond to their scientific maxims. In the same essay on female criminality, Ellis describes the case of a young woman who was executed in Paris for robbing and then murdering her lovers. He has to admit, far from looking “mannish” she was attractive and possessed of “sweet and feminine manners.” However, he proves her abnormality by showing that she possessed “remarkable muscular strength.” Just in case her physical strength was not enough to defeminize her, Ellis adds that not only did she dress as a man but her “chief pleasure was to wrestle with men, and her favorite weapon was the hammer.”19

Many crime historians have noted that nineteenth-century juries felt uncomfortable sentencing a woman to hang, and were often more lenient than they would be with a man accused of the same crime. “There was one circumstance that could overturn the normal pattern of leniency towards
women in sentencing. This occurred when women broke the unspoken rules of gender and sex roles and acted 'mannishly,' aggressively, or without due deference. There was little chivalry displayed toward women who came within the ken of the courts and had broken social taboos." If a woman was "womanly" enough it was easier to believe that no crime had been committed, but if she was "mannish" in behavior or appearance she faced certain conviction.

It is difficult to document the theater's participation in the masculinization of criminal women. Though sociologists, criminologists, and doctors were successfully defeminizing women who killed, the Victorian stage was subject to legal and social constraints that prevented dramatists from examining the complex nature of women who kill. The office of the Lord Chamberlain regularly denied licenses to plays that portrayed "questionable" characters, situations, or languages. Though occasionally the representation of a murderess onstage was allowed by the Lord Chamberlain, the guilty woman was never to be portrayed sympathetically and she must suffer the appropriate punishment either in prison, in the madhouse, or in death.

Even if the Lord Chamberlain had permitted the sympathetic portrayal of a murderess on the stage, the producer would have been hard put to find an actress willing to play the role. In her study of the nineteenth-century actress as working woman, Tracy Davis discusses the actress's marginal social position and her need to lead an exemplary life both on the stage and off. The actress who portrayed a morally unacceptable or socially threatening character risked defaming her own character, as she became equated with the role she portrayed onstage. Davis writes that "the private selves of women who did not specialize in conventionally feminine roles, or who performed in illegitimate lines of business that contravened gestural and vestimentary social norms, were particularly subject to unflattering social judgments." It does not seem surprising, therefore, that the conventions of the Victorian stage, steeped as they were in the culture that produced them, would not allow for the portrayal of a murderess, particularly one who had killed a member of her own family.

An example of the British public's conflicted view of the criminal woman on stage can be found in the response to the Adelphi Theatre's production of *Lafarge; or, Self-Will in Women*. The Lord Chamberlain received the following letter of protest about the performance via the *Morning Herald*: "If English audiences are to be thus brutalized under the ‘express sanction’ of the Chamberlain's office—if the popular mind is, in its recreations, to be familiarized with lust and murder—the sooner the House of Commons relieves your lordship of your present theatrical privilege the better." The
Theatrical Journal responded in the play’s defense, emphasizing the piece’s usefulness as a morality tale, which could sway young wives (who might be tempted to emulate Madame Lafarge) back toward the path of virtue:

Some stupid person thought proper to apply to the Lord Chamberlain to suppress the performance of it. It is now before the public and affords a splendid night’s amusement, without injuring the morals of the rising generation; on the contrary, it is a lesson to those who might err through jealousy. The dramatist . . . has thrown aside all the circumstances connected with the death of her husband and the subsequent trial of Madame Lafarge on the accusation of administering poison.29 (Emphasis mine)

What is fascinating about this defense of the play is the way in which the author disclaims all factual connection with the actual Madame Lafarge—the real circumstances have been “thrown aside” and replaced with a “lesson to those who might err.” The fictionalized account of a woman who kills could be shaped by the author to provide a lesson to the women of the realm. The implication is that a real story, enacted as it occurred, was too unstable, too complex to function as a morality tale. In real life, good and evil are not always so distinct and justice is both relative and elusive.

Mary Edmondson

The custom of altering historical circumstances to fit a preconceived dramatic formula in which good would triumph over evil was standard practice on the Victorian stage. But the dramatization of Mary Edmondson offers us a rare look at the dramatic rehabilitation of the criminal woman. The real Mary Edmondson is an enigma; whether she was guilty or not we will never know, but she died proclaiming her innocence on the gallows. In the genre of criminal biography, the dramatic climax is always the criminal’s tearful repentance at Tyburn, and contemporary accounts confirm that convicted criminals almost always asked forgiveness before their execution. But Mary Edmondson did not conform to type; she protested her innocence to the end, and in an ironic gesture she stood upon the gallows and forgave those who had helped to convict her.

Just as with the Arden narratives, the “facts” of the case are very hard to ascertain, as each recorder wove his own interpretation of the event into the historical evidence. As was the custom in the eighteenth century, Mary Edmondson’s story was recorded in street pamphlets and criminal biographies. Lincoln Faller describes how these popular narratives regularly “fictionalized” their historic subjects: “Popular writers, and presumably their
audiences, shaped the facts of actuality into patterns convenient (and useful) to their imaginations... facts were often invented and [the criminal's] individuality, variously compressed and expanded, was ultimately denied as they were absorbed into the myths of crime."

The primary historical source for Mary Edmondson is the Newgate Calendar, an anecdotal record of convicted eighteenth-century criminals, based primarily on the sessions papers from the proceedings at the Old Bailey. The opening of Mary’s account reads, “There is, and perhaps ever will remain, a mystery in the case of this convict. If she was guilty, she was one of the vilest of hypocrites; if not, the circumstances against her were so strong that the jury could scarcely avoid convicting her.”

The following series of events is the version of the crime recorded in the Newgate Calendar (1825). Mary Edmondson, the daughter of a Yorkshire farmer, had been sent to live with her widowed aunt, a Mrs. Walker, in Rotherhite, where she lived for two years “comporting herself in the most decent manner, and regularly attending the duties of religion.” Late one evening Mary escorted a neighbor, who had been visiting Mrs. Walker, across the street to her home. Moments after Mary left the neighbor’s house, an oyster seller noticed that Mrs. Walker’s door was open and then heard Mary crying out, “Help! murder! they have killed my aunt!”

Mary ran next door to get help while several men from the pub went to investigate the murder scene. They found Mrs. Walker with her throat cut, lying on her right side with her head near a table that was covered with linen she had apparently been folding. Mary told one of the men, a Mr. Holloway, that four men had entered through the back door, one had grabbed her aunt from behind, and the other, dressed in black, swore that he would kill her if she uttered a sound. Mr. Holloway noticed that Mary’s arm was cut, and when asked what had happened, she replied that one of the men had “jammed it with the door.” Holloway did not believe her and accused Mary of murdering her aunt, at which point she “fell into a fit, and, being removed from a neighbor’s house, was blooded by a surgeon, and continued there until the following day, when the coroner’s inquest sat on the body, and brought in a verdict of willful murder; in consequence of which she was committed to prison.”

The case against Mary was constructed on purely circumstantial evidence: the cut on her arm, Mr. Holloway’s initial suspicion, and perhaps most damning, the fact that items she said had been stolen by the intruders were found hidden underneath the privy floor along with a bloodstained apron. Though the author of the Newgate Calendar indicates that Mary offered a defense, he did not deem it necessary to record it, but writes only that “She made a defense indeed; but there was not enough probability in
it to have any weight.” No official record of her defense remains. The author concedes that Mary was convicted “on evidence, which though acknowledged to be circumstantial, was such as, in general opinion, admitted little doubt of her guilt.” There must have been very little doubt indeed, for the jury returned its verdict in just under five minutes.

Mary continued to protest her innocence while she awaited her execution in Newgate prison, and many people believed her, including a prison clergyman who plead for a reprieve, but to no avail. Condemned on a Saturday, Mary was brought to the place of execution on the following Monday, where “she behaved devoutly” and left these final, troubling words: “It is now too late to trifle either with God or man. I solemnly declare that I am innocent of the crime laid to my charge. I am very easy in my mind, as I suffer with as much pleasure as if I was going to sleep. I freely forgive my prosecutors, and earnestly beg your prayers for my departing soul.”

In a society that sought clarity and order from its legal code, Mary’s death, without the required confession or repentance, was disturbing because it implied that either she was innocent or, by eighteenth-century standards, she was “inexplicable.” What murderess facing her Maker in the moment of death would not confess? The only reasonable answer was that she was not guilty. However, the implication that the state had murdered an innocent girl was so unacceptable, that after her death criminal biographers reconstructed Mary’s life story in order to, retroactively, establish her guilt beyond any reasonable doubt. Five different pamphlets appeared, published immediately after her execution. One spoke in Mary’s defense and one, written by her brother-in-law, took a neutral position. The others set out to give Mary a criminal personality and a violent past, fabricating huge sections of “historical” biography to make her seemingly inexplicable crime comprehensible. Unless Mary could be explained as these accounts presented her—a representation that required at crucial points the support of fiction—then “from an eighteenth-century point of view, she could not be explained at all.”

The biographers distort and even invent facts in order to create a Mary Edmondson who their readers could believe was capable of murder. One pamphlet records that Mary “could not bear to be rebuked” and that she once stabbed her mother in the stomach with a penknife. No other version mentions this, and it is vehemently denied by Mary’s brother-in-law, Mr. Clarke, whose pamphlet is titled *Refutation*. While other biographers claim that Mary’s parents sent her away to live with her aunt because they feared her temper and violent nature, Clarke explains her servitude in her aunt’s house in a very different way. He claims that Mary was engaged to be married to a clergyman and that her parents, “thinking her not so well qualified
for a clergyman’s wife as they could have desired,” sent her to learn household skills at her widowed aunt’s home in London.34

No other biography indicates that Mary was engaged to be married, and in fact several take great pains to discredit her femininity and wifely potential. One author writes that Mary was “naturally of a morose and haughty and stubborn Spirit.” Another calls her “somewhat passionate, resolute and of a masculine Spirit.” Still another claims that her parents felt she was “headstrong, self-willed, uncontrollable and unadvisable” and “very careless and indifferent about Household affairs.”35

It is significant that the biographers who attempted to prove Mary’s guilt frame her character as distinctly unfeminine, leaving the impression that Mary was not a very “womanly” woman. They assign her highly masculine attributes, even a “mannish” appearance, in order to locate her criminality in what are perceived as unwomanly, hence “unnatural,” qualities of appearance and temperament. Still, for all their reconstructive historicizing, these biographers could not erase the vision of the young woman upon the gallows protesting her innocence to the end and forgiving those who were about to hang her.

One hundred years after her enigmatic death, Charles H. Hazelwood, drawn perhaps to the mystery that lingered around her case, resurrected Mary on the London stage. Mary Edmonstone; A Pathetic and Romantic Drama premiered at the Britannia Theatre in December 1862. Hazelwood’s version of the story bears little resemblance to any of the historical narratives. True to the conventions of the nineteenth-century stage, Mary, as heroine of the piece, does not have any of the negative attributes assigned her by the “biographers.” Hazelwood softens what they called unmanageableness into “high spiritedness,” easily explained as the youthful energy of a country girl suddenly thrust into the big city of London. Clearly, Hazelwood also wishes to resolve the mystery of Mary’s execution, but unlike the eighteenth-century biographers who “created” a criminal personality for Mary in order to explain away the doubt, he simply asserts that Mary did not confess to the crime because she did not do it.

In the first scene, Hazelwood presents Mary as a high-spirited girl, somewhat frivolous, but safely engaged to a local pastor. Her aunt, Mrs. Walker, complains to her servant that Mary’s behavior is not suitable for a clergyman’s wife:

MRS. WALKER: I wish my niece Mary was as dutiful as you are Gregory. I sent for her from Yorkshire, thinking she would be a friend and companion for me, but the giddy girl’s head seems completely turned since she has been in London; she’d be at some place of amusement every
night if she could, but I object to such frivolity. Being as she is, betrothed to Mr. Francis King, the clergyman, I am anxious she should follow my example, and set her face against vain pleasures of all kinds.36

The aunt, disapproving of Mary’s irreverent sense of humor, threatens to place her niece in domestic service to ready her for marriage. It seems that Mary has only two options: to be a good housekeeper and wife or to learn the skills necessary for that “occupation” as a servant in someone else’s house. The option of living on her own or enjoying the city life at her own leisure is completely out of the question. Gregory asks Mary why she hasn’t become more serious since she became engaged:

MARY: Can’t one be merry and wise at the same time? Do you suppose that really kind-hearted people always pull a face a yard long, and are as stiff in their manners as a couple of deal boards. Not they; merry hearts make smiling faces; and where there is good humor you will mostly find good dispositions. (4)

These hardly seem the words of a “headstrong, self-willed, uncontrol- lable and unadvisable” murderess. Hazelwood’s heroine is charming, kind-hearted, and filled with good humor; though she gets frustrated with her cross aunt, she never offers serious rebellion. She never resists her domestic calling. Looking forward to her marriage with Francis, she longs for the day she can be a housekeeper in her own home.

While Mary is contemplating the freedom that marriage will bring her, her brother Mark appears. He is in debt to two ruffians and hopes to borrow money from his aunt, but Mary persuades him not to trouble the old woman. Mark then leaves (presumably to earn an honest living) but the two ruffians, having followed him to Mrs. Walker’s house, rob and murder her. Since the audience has seen the murder enacted on stage, there is no mystery: the audience knows Mary is innocent. Unfortunately, for Mary, no one on stage does.

Mary returns to find her aunt’s body and a bloody knife with the initials M. E. on the handle. Believing they stand for Mark Edmonstone (her brother) she tries to hide the knife. It is discovered, however, and the magis-istrate, thinking the M. E. stands for Mary Edmonstone, places her under arrest for murder. Mary does not speak in her own defense because she fears that her brother is guilty of the murder, and she is willing to sacrifice her own life before she will jeopardize his. When Mary refuses to answer the magistrate’s questions, her fiancé, Francis, turns her silence into a crime against him. “Have you no thought for me, none—I who have toiled
through poverty and difficulty to better my position—that I might also bet-
yer yours.” He calls her a “cruel, stubborn, wicked girl!” and pushes her to
the ground as she tries to cling to him for protection (16). The first act ends
with this tragic tableau.

Tried and sentenced to be executed, Mary discovers, too late, that her
brother is innocent of the crime. He had lost his memory in a debtor’s
prison and had just that morning discovered that Mary is sentenced to hang
for the murder of their aunt. At this point it is too late for Mary to change
her story, and she castigates herself for believing her brother could have
been capable of murder. Condemned to die for no reason at all now, Mary
despairs: “I have played with existence as a child would with a toy, and now
see it lying broken before me” (22).

But all is not lost. (When is it ever in Victorian melodrama?) Mark real-
izes that the two ruffians he owes money to are in the cell next door, sen-
tenced to die for arson and robbery. Lo and behold, one of them is named
Michael Evans, hence the incriminating M. E. on the knife handle. As
Mary is led to the gallows, her brother pleads with the real criminals to con-
fess: “It is not only her life, but mine that trembles in the balance; for never
can I live to be pointed at as the brother of a murderess” (26). They refuse
and the ballad singers are already selling Mary’s “last dying speech and con-
fession” on the street (a nice nod to the fictional histories created as a mat-
ter of course at the gallows site) when Michael Evans repents and confesses
his crime to the prison governor. Mary is cut down from the gallows at the
last moment and, barely conscious, is carried, alive but lifeless, drained of
her former spirit, onto the stage for the final tableau.

At first it would seem that we could learn nothing about nineteenth-
century female criminality from this highly constructed plot, primarily
because in this version Mary is innocent. As in much nineteenth-century
discourse, however, examining what is not said can often be as informative
as analyzing what is. A strong articulation of gendered values emerges if
you consider what the playwright did not include from the historical record
left by Mary’s “biographers.” Hazelwood’s Mary is neither mannish, self-
willed, uncontrollable, or unadvisable, nor is she adverse to housework.
Clearly, she fulfills nineteenth-century expectations of femininity. Noting
which of the negative character traits assigned to Mary in the pamphlets
Hazelwood ignored or transformed provides an excellent example of how
a woman could be decriminalized for representation on the Victorian
stage. Her initial high-spiritedness and frivolity, so evident in the first
scene, are punished by the trial she endures, but because she is willing and
eager to perform the loyal duties of sister and wife (she still loves Francis
despite his immediate rejection of her) she will be redeemed in the end.
Mary becomes increasingly passive as the play progresses, dominating the first scene but then scripted into a position of silence and inaction. In the final tableau she lies, barely conscious, an innocent woman in her husband-to-be’s strong arms. She can be saved but only at the expense of her individuality and spirit.

In Hazelwood’s “pathetic and romantic drama” Mary is tamed by an act of self-sacrifice that transforms her from a “giddy” girl into a true Victorian woman. By placing the needs of others far above her own, even at the cost of her own life, Mary is absorbed into the comfortable gender expectations of an age that equated femininity with passivity and service to others. Her acceptance of womanly sacrifice, far more than her actual guiltlessness, is offered as proof of Mary’s innocence.

Cultural anxiety coupled with conventions of the Victorian stage, and the dictates of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, guaranteed that there would be no authentic representations of women who killed on the Victorian stage. In her study of Victorian murderesses, Mary Hartman calls the thirteen women she examines “uncomfortably ordinary,” but Victorian culture and the theater it produced did everything in its power to shape the criminal woman as an aberration. If a woman’s life story did not reinforce or support the cultural construction of gender, the choice was clear: ignore her or, as in the case of Mary Edmondson, change her story. It would be many more years before dramatists would begin to question the construction of femininity or to critique the culture that criminalized those who would not conform to its gender expectations.

The idea that virtue must always triumph on the stage was a common Victorian trope—but whose idea of virtuous behavior would it be? The men who wrote for the theater clearly believed it was virtuous for a woman to suffer without complaint and to have no thought for her own safety. True, if her brutish husband was not reformed by the wife’s love, he would die in the end (either from alcoholism or while engaged in a criminal act) but the heroine stuck by him no matter what the cost to herself. The woman who takes the blame for a loved one’s crime is a common character in the Victorian drama. As the mandatory death of the fallen woman demonstrated, these dramatists also believed that it was not virtuous for a woman to place her own happiness before that of her husband’s. Remember the words of advice Isabel offers to other wives in *East Lynne*: “O lady, wife, mother! whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the nature, the endurance of woman to bear, yet resolve to bear them.”

Like the legal system, which provided virtually no adequate protection for abused wives, nineteenth-century playwrights espoused the grin-and-
bear-it philosophy when it came to domestic violence. Parliament did not grant women the right to leave their abusive husbands until 1895, and neither did Victorian dramatists. Fallen women who had left their husbands and children, or virtuous heroines who stuck by their husbands through thick and thin were staples of the Victorian stage. The one character that never appeared was the woman who walked away from her family because she would have been beaten to death if she did not.

Domestic abuse presented the Victorians with a complex social dilemma, for it problematized the whole concept of coverture and separate sexual spheres. The justification for denying a wife legal rights was that her husband was supposed to protect her, but this left the abused wife with no recourse in the public realm if her husband was the one she needed protection from. John Stuart Mill, introducing the Woman's Suffrage Reform Bill in 1867, tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Parliament that police records showed women could not rely on men for protection. Mill charged that even when abusive husbands were convicted of assault, the penalties were so light as to be nothing but an inconvenience.

The violent husband was occasionally represented on the Victorian stage, but he was inevitably of the lower class, usually a criminal, and probably foreign. Wives who resisted this violence were much harder to find; they preferred to stand by their man no matter what the cost to themselves or their children. On the whole Victorian dramatists shied away from presenting domestic violence. However, references to the common occurrence of violence in domestic situations can be found in other forms of popular culture. An extremely popular form of entertainment was The Punch and Judy Show, a favorite of children and adults alike. The violence in this puppet show was quite intense; in the course of a half-hour show Punch bashed his child's brain in, threw him out the window, and then beat his wife to death when she complained. This was all played for humor, and crowds howled with delight at the violent antics of the little “everyman.” One observer had wondered whether Punch’s violent method of extricating himself from a tiresome marriage might give some other unhappy husband murderous ideas:

Sometimes I note a henpeck’d wight,  
Enjoying thy martial might,—  
To him a beatific beau ideal:  
He counts each crack on Judy’s pate,  
Then homeward creeps to cogitate  
The differences ‘twixt dramatic wives and real.
In spite of the nonstop violence, *The Punch and Judy Show* was, for the most part, considered harmless entertainment suitable for all ages. In *Picturesque Sketches of London* (1852) Thomas Miller describes a small boy captivated by the puppet show: “Look at that ragged woman holding up her dirty child. The little rogue claps his tiny hands, and crows again at every blow Judy receives.” Punch and Judy, found on any given day on East End street corners or in West End drawing rooms, indeed offered Victorians a morality tale, and the moral was this: He who has the stick wins.

Beneath the surface of the English cult of domesticity there emerged a deep current of agitation that threatened to expose the true nature of the Victorian home. In late-nineteenth-century England a rising suffrage movement began to challenge the exclusivity of a masculine legal code, and for the first time a small but dedicated group of men and women openly questioned the legitimacy of coverture as a philosophical and legal convention. Although women did not legally attain “full personhood” in marriage until 1895 (with the Summary Jurisdiction Act, which allowed a woman to leave her husband for “persistent cruelty”), a series of legal decisions including the Divorce Act (1857), the Married Women’s Property Acts (1870, 1882), and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1878) significantly challenged the legal precedent of coverture.

As women acquired more rights, representations of the female offender in the courts, press, physiognomical handbooks, and on the stage became enmeshed in a larger anxiety about feminist emancipation. Women who usurped what the culture had coded as masculine attributes and rights—sexual freedom, political activism, economic independence—found themselves criminalized, while those who had actually committed a crime were stripped of their femaleness. The criminal woman was so intensely vilified because her very presence in the culture exposed the fragility of the Victorian construct of femininity.

**Arsenic and Old Men**

By the late nineteenth century traditional explanations of female criminality came under pressure from social reformers and feminists. The idea that women were led to murder by their unbridled sexuality or their unnatural masculine qualities persevered, but the gnawing sense that there might be other, more complex, reasons for the prevalence of domestic murder was lurking in the wings. Havelock Ellis concludes his study of the British criminal with this caveat: “To kill the criminal is never satisfactory, because we do not kill his accomplices, bad social conditions and defective institutions;
we leave untouched the false social sentiments that urged the unmarried girl to kill her own child, or the rigid marriage system that made it easier for the man to kill his wife than to leave her or to allow her of leaving him."

Many feminists believed that alternate explanations for female criminality—economic and physical dependence, impossible divorce legislation, alcoholism, and abuse—would never be reflected in the judicial process until women were judged by a jury of their peers, a jury of women. Nineteenth-century feminist Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy expressed the view of many nineteenth-century feminists when she wrote, “Women have never in the case of a criminal trial the protection of a jury of their peers—they are prosecuted or defended by men, tried by men, judged by men. Is it impossible that sex bias should ever work injustice? Does it not at the very least, often lead to the forgetfulness or neglect of the most important considerations?”

At the end of the nineteenth century Florence Maybrick was tried for the murder of her husband. Mr. James Maybrick, like many Victorian gentlemen, was addicted to arsenic, which could be taken in small doses as a “pick-me-up.” Given Maybrick’s years of habitual “arsenic eating,” Florence’s lawyers argued that his death was caused by a self-induced overdose and not a deliberate poisoning by his wife. James Maybrick was an acknowledged hypochondriac; when he died, over one hundred bottles of medicine were found in his home and twenty-eight more in his office. Also found in the house were many boxes filled with packages of arsenic, enough to kill more than fifty healthy people. In addition twelve sheets of flypaper (laced with arsenic) were found; they had been purchased by Florence Maybrick, ostensibly as a cosmetic aid.

In the course of the trial it came out that Florence and James had quarreled shortly before his death and that she threatened to leave him after he had given her a black eye. According to a maid’s testimony, James tore his wife’s clothes and told her that if she left she would never see the children again. The maid begged Mrs. Maybrick to stay “for the sake of the children.”

Medical experts argued about whether the quantity of arsenic found in Maybrick’s body was capable of killing him. Their contradictory evidence bolstered Florence’s case, and she enjoyed significant public support until she made the fatal error of confessing to adultery in her statement to the court. Florence’s admission of adultery turned judge and jury against her, though no one seemed disturbed by James Maybrick’s longtime extramarital affair. If anything it was seen as a motive for Florence’s “revenge.” Justice Stephens, who was recovering from a recent stroke, cited Florence’s love letters as evidence of a murderous intent:
She, while her husband lived and, according to her own account, while his life was trembling in the balance—even at that awful moment there arose in her heart and flowed from her pen various terms of endearment to a man with whom she behaved so disgracefully. That was an awful thing to think of, and a thing you will have to consider in asking yourselves whether she is guilty or not guilty.45

Within half an hour Florence was found guilty and sentenced to death. Asked if she had anything to say upon hearing the verdict she replied, “Although I have been found guilty, with the exception of my intimacy with Mr. Brierley, I am not guilty of this crime.”46

In 1892, three years after Florence Maybrick’s conviction, Sydney Grundy’s A Fool’s Paradise opened at the Garrick Theatre. The critic H. Chance Newton claimed that “disguise it as he would, Grundy had dramatized the great Maybrick Mystery in every detail,”47 but in actuality, with the exception of the arsenic flypaper, there is no trace of the original case in this play. The villainess, Beatrice, is poisoning her unsuspecting (and adoring) husband because her old lover, Ned (who happens to be her husband’s best friend) has returned. Being a man of honor, Ned wants nothing to do with Beatrice, preferring to court her companion (who is actually her husband’s sister from another marriage, though no one knows this). The family doctor/detective solves the case, and Beatrice is caught before her husband dies. In true melodramatic fashion, she swallows poison and expires before she can be arrested for her crime.

Grundy’s play, if it can be said to be based upon the Maybrick trial at all, is a very shallow treatment of a case that caused considerable controversy. Though the twelve men of the jury were convinced of Florence’s guilt, the women of England were far more sympathetic to her cause. Hundreds of women attended Florence Maybrick’s trial, many standing vigil for days outside the packed courtroom. The overwhelming number of the silent female spectators caused considerable consternation in the British press. A Liverpool paper castigated these “creatures called ladies,” believing they attended the trial only out of a prurient interest:

What filth they must have in their hearts! What greed of lustful curiosity! What smug hypocrisy in their offenseless faces! What a dunghill of dirt seething and stinking behind their modest eyes and placid brows! For the women there is no excuse! Nothing but a prurient thirst for beastliness can account for their being there at all! In a place that every true woman should shrink from and abhor as she would a gaol or a brothel!48
What the gentleman from Liverpool did not report to his readers was the fact that these women were not there to gape at Florence Maybrick, they were there to support her. When Florence was convicted women cried out in fury, and almost half a million people, mostly women, signed petitions to the Home Office demanding a reprieve. Many wrote to the newspapers in protest, and a sampling of their letters indicates how bold women were daring to be in public:

Of course the jurors decided for their sex. Doubtless each one was a husband and became bitter on a dishonoring wife. (Daily Post, 15 August 1889)

Crime is crime irrespective of sex. But to “stone” a weak woman for the same crime a man is allowed to commit with impunity [adultery] is not by any means fair play. (New York Herald, London edition, 14 August 1889)

Eventually the campaign to free Florence Maybrick gained many male supporters, and through the efforts of American newspaperwomen, thousands of outraged women in the United States joined their voices in protest against a legal system that continued to equate a woman’s adultery with murder. As one woman writes, “If this sentence is carried out, immorality and murder will be synonymous terms.” The protests did have an effect; Florence Maybrick’s death sentence was commuted to life in prison.

Justice Stephens, like Sydney Grundy in A Fool’s Paradise, may have wished to mold Florence Maybrick into a two-dimensional Victorian villainess, but many Englishwomen and men fiercely protested that representation. Florence Maybrick, adulteress, may have been convicted of murder by the state, but there can be no doubt that she was acquitted by the jury of her peers.