

“Wilful” Women:  
Representations of Female  
Murderers in *The London Times*  
from 1805 to 1880

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### *Abstract*

Criminal violence found a home in both political change and sensationalized journalism throughout 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Publications like the *London Times* capitalized on the public's growing interest in criminality by crafting murderous characters out of trials at the Old Bailey, therefore creating a handful of common storylines that reinforced social positions. Murderous women were characterized primarily as either mentally-unstable mothers, accidentally violent drunks, or battered victims acting in self-defense. The *Times* tried almost two hundred women in the court of public opinion, in some instances created celebrities who were used to justify further criminal reform. This article focuses on the ways female-driven murder can be analyzed in the *London Times* as understandings of gender and crime shifted during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## *Introduction*

On the night of March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1841, 23-year-old Harriet Longley appeared in front of the Islington stationhouse in northern London. Knocking on the patrol station door, Longley explained to the sergeant on duty that she had just thrown her three-week-old daughter into the New River, and that she came to the station to confess. She explained that the infant had been crying for hours, and because she was so poor and malnourished herself, her “great distress of mind and body” drove her to murder.<sup>1</sup> After police dragged the river, the body of an infant was found and Longley was charged with the “wilful [sic] murder of her illegitimate child.”<sup>2</sup>

In the three months after her arrest, Harriet Longley was featured in four articles in the *London Times* about her trial and punishment. The *Times* repeatedly mentioned the child’s illegitimacy while describing Longley as destitute and impoverished, reporting that she went to multiple parishes and workhouses for assistance in the weeks leading up to the murder, but had been denied each time.<sup>3</sup> While there was no doubt that Longley was guilty of murder, she was by no means portrayed as a coldblooded killer. The *Times* characterized Longley as an “unfortunate young woman” who killed her baby “during a paroxysm of despair” of both mental and physical anguish.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to read Longley’s case without feeling pity for her; feelings deliberately crafted by the *Times* to place Longley into the trope of the mentally distraught mother.

The *Times* crafted various tropes of female violence based on both the criminal and victim. According to the *Times*, women who killed their young children did so in manic episodes, losing control of their mental and physical states. They committed violence as a means

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<sup>1</sup> “Murder,” *London Times*, March 24, 1841, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>2</sup> “Central Criminal Court, Saturday, April 10,” *London Times*, April 12, 1841, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>3</sup> “Murder,” *London Times*, March 24, 1841, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>4</sup> “The Convict, Harriet Longley,” *London Times*, May 13, 1841, *The Times Digital Archive*.

of self-preservation or mercy towards their children, and appeared remorseful and broken after their crimes. The handful of women found guilty of murder while drunk often used their alcohol consumption as an excuse for their crimes, usually receiving more lenient sentencing than their sober counterparts. While their drunken state seemed to unleash violence, once they sobered up they also appeared repentant in court. Women who killed in self-defense were also viewed in their own way, primarily taking on the position as the meek and desperate victim, forced to commit violence because of circumstance. In order to confirm the woman's story, the court and therefore the *Times* relied on witness testimony to describe the relationship between the guilty party and the deceased. While some of these tropes are more prevalent than others, they can be used as three basic outlines for the evolution of violent women in the *London Times*' beginnings of crime journalism.

But, not all women fit into these classic categories of female murderers— and this handful of women often became the most famous. Beginning with Sarah Gale in 1837, the *Times* published an uncharacteristically large number of articles about seven women whose crimes were especially out of the ordinary. From victims to methods to sentencing, this handful of women generated a greater public interest than the average female murderer. The public, fueled by the *Times*, took an interest in these women because they were anomalies, and often used their cases when discussing larger aspects of crime and punishment in England, with some legal and political figures referring to their cases when calling for criminal reforms. Sensationalism and celebrity may not have followed every female murderer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the handful who were picked up by the *Times* indicated a shift in the ways the press and therefore the public viewed violent women. Through an examination of the *London Times* from 1805 to 1880, this paper shows how the tropes of the manic mother, the disorderly drunk, and the vengeful victim

were used to categorize female murderers and sensationalized those who did not fit into these molds as violent celebrities used for political reasons, demonstrating how murderous women were often viewed as caricatures of violence instead of real criminals.

### *Historiography*

Many historians study criminality, but cases of a handful of criminals or actions are often forgotten. Criminal historians primarily focus on the causes of and reactions to criminality, as seen in the works of Clive Emsley and Peter Linebaugh, who both study the social constructions of crime and its implications. But this philosophical approach to history pushes the actual people impacted by crime to the sidelines.

New scholarly work has shifted from a theoretical standpoint to more of a social history, basing analysis in the realities faced by both criminals and the general public. A focus on female criminality can be accredited to Mary S. Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses*, published in 1977, in which Hartman uses popular media to show the ways women accused of various violent crimes would have understood their gender positioning before and during their trials.<sup>5</sup> Kathy Callahan's "Women Who Kill: An Analysis of Cases in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century London" appeared in 2013 and primarily relied on legal records instead of cultural publications.<sup>6</sup> Analyzing mass media and popular cultural to understand how people viewed morality and criminality was also used by Rosalind Crone in her 2012 analysis of crime culture, *Violent Victorians*. Crone does not focus on the specific criminals but instead the different ways Victorian England was entertained by gruesomeness, ranging from violent puppet shows to

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<sup>5</sup> Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Kathy Callahan, "Women Who Kill: An Analysis of Cases in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century London," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 4 (2013): 1013–1038. *Project Muse*.

teapots modeled after crime scenes to wax museums of murderers.<sup>7</sup> While historians use both legal records and popular culture, the emphasis on popular culture in the majority of their works shows that it plays a large role in how historians understand both bystander and criminal perspectives.

Media, especially the *London Times*, played a central role in how the public understood the world around them, as seen in Christopher Casey's 2011 article "Common Misperceptions: The Press and Victorian Views of Crime." Casey argues media reports misconstrued the public into believing that violent crime was on the rise throughout the mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup> century, when in reality statistics show the opposite was occurring.<sup>8</sup> As shown in Casey's article, studying what the public viewed as the truth is just as important as understanding the truth itself. In a sociological and anthropological context, articles from women and gender studies publications also appear throughout research on criminal or violent women, with a majority of these works focused on incarcerated women today and their presence in mass media. These works tend to focus on specific demographics, such as LGBTQ+ women or women of color, and primarily work in a smaller state or regional geographical area.<sup>9</sup> But, outside of Hartman's work, very little has been done on popular culture's understanding of violent women specifically.

The importance of media crafting public perceptions of criminality is also not unique to 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Today, the sensationalism of violent crime, especially when committed by women, remains profitable and entertaining. Women like Jodi Arias, Amanda Knox, and Andrea

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<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). For puppet shows, "About Town with Mr. Punch." For material culture's representations of criminals, see page 93-94. For wax museums, see pages 41, 45-46, 86-90, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher A. Casey, "Common Misperceptions: The Press and Victorian Views of Crime," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41, no. 3 (2011): 367-391.

<sup>9</sup> For modern understandings of women who kill in the western world, see Lorana Bartels, Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland, Noni Nelson. "How Are Women Who Kill Portrayed in Newspaper Media? Connections with Social Values and the Legal System." *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 51 (May 2015): 31-40.

Yates were headline news before, during, and after their trials. Media transitioned from print and material culture to television and Internet, but still uses violence's shock factor to generate profit. Next to Hartman, Crone, and Casey all establishing the importance of popular media along with Callahan beginning to fill the gap within the larger history of violent women, this research will combine these two topics to analyze media representations of female murderers. By examining the digital archive of the court proceedings of the Old Bailey and *London Times*, both legal and popular documentation of female murderers will be employed to create an understanding of how these women were viewed by their society, as well as what factors made a woman's crime worthy of sensationalism.

#### *Source Analysis*

Between 1805 and 1880, the English court system found 178 women guilty of either murder, manslaughter, petty treason, or infanticide.<sup>10</sup> The Old Bailey's extensive online archive stores legal records from 1674 to 1913, documenting essentially every type of crime and sentencing. Violent crimes perpetrated by women make up less than 1% of the Old Bailey's records, and the most common crimes committed by both men and women primarily concerned property theft.<sup>11</sup> The Old Bailey provides astounding records of hundreds of years of criminal history, making it a vital resource for discussions of English crime.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, England saw a variety of legal and social shifts that changed the way crime and punishment were understood and implemented. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century still followed the strict Bloody Codes, where essentially all crimes could be punished with execution.

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<sup>10</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 6.0, 17 April 2011), Tabulating killing subcategory against decade, between 1805 and 1880. Counting by defendant found guilty.

<sup>11</sup> For the statistic on the 1%, see Callahan, 1013. For theft see Callahan, 1018.

The 1830s and 1840s saw reforms in the Bloody Codes, only allowing a handful of crimes to use capital punishment and therefore creating the modern prison system. These reforms also shifted the way the public engaged with crime, with mainstream newspapers covering arrests, trials, and executions as sensationalized journalism. By the 1880s, the Victorian era's understandings of crime reports as a form of entertainment were in full effect. This timeline crafted the sources this research will use by outlining how society, and therefore media, changed over a roughly 80-year period.

Because the average Londoner would not be reading the legal accounts from the Old Bailey, it is vital to consult media that would have been consumed as simultaneously entertainment and journalism to understand how society viewed criminality. Of the 178 women found guilty of murder in this time frame, only 51% (91 cases) appear in the *London Times*. An analysis of the *Times* provides a strong base to understand how the public viewed criminality because not only was it one of the most circulated newspapers in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, but it was also read across class lines.<sup>12</sup> Killing-based crime perpetrated by women reported in the *Times* ranged from premeditated arsenic poisoning to heat-of-the-moment bar fights, thrusting women of all ages into detailed media scrutiny. In general, the *Times* tended to include the offender's name, age, occupation, and marital status as the opening line in crime reporting, giving the reader immediate exposure to information that would situate the offender in a specific social standing. An offender's marital status was almost always offered in the *Times*, and single women were often referred to as "spinsters," which simply meant they were not married.<sup>13</sup> Analyzing articles in the *Times* can show how female murderers were not only viewed by the courts, but

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<sup>12</sup> Casey, 369.

<sup>13</sup> "Word History: Where Does the Term Spinster Come From? Patriarchy," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2IQPZEw>.



also by the world around them. As England changed the way crime and punishment were carried out, the media's importance in understanding criminality grew. The *Times* placed violent women into various tropes based on their murders, as well as elevated specific women into fame due to the nature of their crimes.

*"I love my children too dearly to leave them to the tender mercies of the world"*

*Infanticide and Infant Murder*<sup>14</sup>

If criminal research was only based on reports from the *Times*, it would appear as though the vast majority of female murderers killed their own children, primarily under the age of two years old and because of illegitimacy. But, examining the complete data as found in the Old Bailey tells a slightly different story. The three categories of infanticide, manslaughter, and murder are divided almost perfectly, with around 60 convictions of each crime.<sup>15</sup> And although infanticide has a large number of cases in the Old Bailey, the term only appears once as an official legal conviction in the *Times*, in the 1863 case of Sarah Wigley.<sup>16</sup> In the specific era in question, infanticide could only be committed by an unmarried person, primarily a woman, against an illegitimate child.<sup>17</sup> Both manslaughter and infanticide were also associated with concealing a birth, and women who could not be found guilty of either type of murder were usually punished for the latter crime.

Much like age and occupation, the *Times* included the offender's marital status and victim's level of illegitimacy to further categorize crime. A woman killing her child was already

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<sup>14</sup> "Charges Of Murder," *London Times*, May 28, 1880, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>15</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 6.0, 17 April 2011), Tabulating killing subcategory against decade, between 1805 and 1880. Counting by defendant found guilty.

<sup>16</sup> "Police," *London Times*, April 21, 1863, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>17</sup> Callahan, 1021.

viewed as a heinous crime; but adding on that the child was illegitimate signaled that the mother was sexually active outside of marriage. This hinted that the offender already had a questionable moral character before her trial started. The first time a child was characterized as illegitimate was not noted until the 1839 trial of Jane Wales, an “unnatural mother” who stood accused of “inhumanly [destroying]” her newborn son; before this case, children were either described as fatherless or their mothers as single.<sup>18</sup> Until 1844, the vast majority of women prosecuted for the murder or manslaughter of an illegitimate child were sentenced to death, regardless of how sympathetic or pitiful the media portrayed them.

Mary Furley’s 1844 case saw a significant shift in how infant murder and manslaughter were sentenced, as Furley was pardoned by the Crown due to her being “in great distress of the mind” at the time of the crime.<sup>19</sup> Furley’s name appeared in seven articles in the *Times*, where most women appear in only one or two. The *Times* reported on this case in more detail than ever seen before, with most of the articles published following the Queen’s pardon. Furley’s case itself was not necessarily special, though; the five cases before her were also for the murder of illegitimate children. Why the Crown pardoned her over the other women in similar situations cannot be determined through the *Times* alone. But following this royal pardon, Furley appears in five more articles as the face of sympathy, with calls for a more lenient punishment even after a judge alters her sentence to seven years transportation instead of death.<sup>20</sup> In a larger context, the sudden interest in Furley’s fate matches a political and legal view of corporal punishment and the death sentence. The 1830s and 1840s saw significant justice reform, with only a handful of

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<sup>18</sup> “Coroner’s Inquest,” *London Times*, August 27, 1839, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>19</sup> “Murder,” *London Times*, April 17, 1844, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>20</sup> For calls for a new sentence see: “The Mercy of the Crown,” *London Times*, May 20, 1844, *The Times Digital Archive*. For calls for more lenient sentences see: “Harbours of Refuge, Brighton, May 21,” *London Times*, May 23, 1844, *The Times Digital Archive*.

crimes warranting death sentences compared to decades before under the Bloody Codes.<sup>21</sup> Furley was the first instance of a royal pardon resulting in a new punishment that warranted death only a few years before.

Following Furley's case and the various legal reforms of the 1840s, women accused of manslaughter or murder of their newborn children often had charges reduced to concealing a birth when the prosecution could not prove the child was born alive. Until 1803, women were presumed to have killed their children unless they could prove they wanted the child, such as by having baby clothes prepared for them.<sup>22</sup> This same 1803 infanticide reform also allowed juries to convict on "concealing a birth" when proof of deliberate murder could not be upheld.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with a more scientific understanding of the human body and process of childbirth, juries often reduced charges from manslaughter/murder of an infant to concealing a birth, as it became harder for the prosecution to prove the child was born alive. Sarah Freeman's 1848 change of "wilful [sic] murder" was reduced to concealing a birth when a surgeon gave a lengthy and heavily recorded testimony that there was no way to determine if her illegitimate son was born alive or dead.<sup>24</sup> As capital punishment could only be applied to four crimes by 1840, Freeman was given a year imprisonment instead of death.<sup>25</sup> This system of reducing murder or manslaughter to concealing a birth became so common that the Times even referred to it as "the usual verdict" in the 1862 case of Salome Newman.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Casey, 367.

<sup>22</sup> Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice - Crimes Tried at the Old Bailey", *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 7.0, 02 May 2018).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Old Court," *London Times*, November 1, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>25</sup> For capital punishment see: Casey, 371. For Freeman, *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> "Central Criminal Court, Dec 17," *London Times*, December 18, 1862, *The Times Digital Archive*.

As legal reform changed the ways women could be prosecuted following the death of an infant, the *Times* began portraying these women as more sympathetic and worthy of public pity. Women were usually given more of a backstory, such as detailing their social position, as a way to justify to the reader why they committed the crime they were accused of. Either through their life story or demeanor in the courtroom, women were often described as meek or pitiful. They came from “melancholy positions” in life, “[seemed] almost reduced to a shadow” in court, and presented as “fully sensible of [their] serious position.”<sup>27</sup> By crafting an image of a remorseful woman, the *Times* subconsciously influenced how readers understood these violent women. An emphasis on their tragic situations in life signaled not only a more sympathetic view of humanity also present in the judicial reforms of the 1840s, but also shows how both journalists and readers understood criminality. These shifts made sentences such as imprisonment or hard labor, as opposed to death, easier for readers to comprehend. But, these changes in how society understood criminality also removed some of the agency from violent women. Instead of being women who deliberately killed their children, women on trial after 1844 were viewed as victims of unfortunate circumstances, acting in manic episodes and losing control over their thoughts and actions. Not only did charges of concealing a birth become more common in the cases of infant murder, but the idea of the hysterical woman acting without agency grew as well.

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<sup>27</sup> For quote 1 see: “Central Criminal Court, Nov. 25,” *London Times*, November 26, 1852, *The Times Digital Archive*. For quote 2 see: “Police,” *London Times*, May 13, 1857, *The Times Digital Archive*. For quote 3 see: “Police,” *London Times*, April 2, 1857, *The Times Digital Archive*.

“... the prisoner, who was in a beastly state of drunkenness...”

*Alcohol as a Cause of and Excuse for Violence*<sup>28</sup>

Both the justice system and women on trial often used alcohol to explain violence, sometimes as a way to escape severe punishment and other times as a means to prove a crime was especially gruesome. The *Times* followed this same structure, either using drunkenness to explain leniency or justify harsher punishment, based on the guilty party's history of alcohol consumption. Drunkenness was used to explain essentially all types of murders, from infant neglect to deliberate homicide, but is more difficult to track because it is not necessarily a legal classification in the Old Bailey. The *Times* is the only source available to understand a perpetrator's sobriety at the time of their crime, complicating the idea of quantifying how many murders can be directly connected to alcohol consumption. Alcoholism, now considered a disease, was viewed as a moral vice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this idea of morality is reflected in the *Times* articles referring to women as habitual drinkers, which carries a significantly more negative connotation than someone who indulges sporadically, which was considered normal.<sup>29</sup> From 1804 to 1880, approximately twelve women found guilty of a murder that can be directly tied to drunkenness, with this number coming from readings of the 92 *Times* articles of guilty women.

Disorderly drunkenness was primarily associated with arguments that escalated into fatal injury, but alcohol was also used to justify lighter sentences for particularly violence murders. Catherine Ryan's 1805 quarrel with a friend over paying a debt turned into a physical argument where Ryan cracked the woman's skull, eventually killing her the next day.<sup>30</sup> Ryan and the

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<sup>28</sup> “Central Criminal Court, Saturday, June 19,” *London Times*, June 21, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>29</sup> Hartman, 165.

<sup>30</sup> “Old Bailey Sessions, Friday, Sept. 20,” *London Times*, September 21, 1805, *The Times Digital Archive*.

victim were “on friendly terms” before the fight, and witnesses claimed they were both drunk during and after the incident.<sup>31</sup> Articles before the 1830s offer only short descriptions of crime because they fall before the Bloody Code reforms, and the *Times* did not see regular documentation of crime until the 1840s. While it is highly likely that other murders fueled by alcohol took place after Ryan’s 1805 crime, the next instance of drunken violence by women was not documented in the *Times* until 1841 with the arrests of Mary Long and Hannah Covington. The two friends, ages 25 and 28, were found guilty of beating their landlord to death over a longstanding feud, but were given only six month of hard labor after the judge claimed “that they had brought themselves into that disgraceful situation through drink.”<sup>32</sup> The *Times* did not portray the women as habitual drinkers, but instead claimed that their crimes would have never happened without the presence of alcohol.

Drinking was also used as a defense in crimes against children, as seen in Bridget Sullivan’s 1861 trial. Sullivan was watching a 10-month-old baby when she severely burned the child with a fire poker, which caused infection and later death.<sup>33</sup> Although witnesses claimed Sullivan had a violent past toward other children in her care, the jury “recommended her to mercy, because they believed that she was drunk at the time, and that the act as the result of gross carelessness and negligence, and that the fatal injury was not wilfully [sic] inflicted” and she was given six months hard labor, detailed in the second article about her case.<sup>34</sup> If the *Times* would have stopped reporting on Sullivan’s trial after the first article about her, the reader would have probably assumed she was executed because of the gruesome nature of her crime; but because an emphasis was put on her drunken state, as well as a witness claiming the other adults

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> “Central Criminal Court, Wednesday, July 7,” *London Times*, July 8, 1841, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>33</sup> “Police,” *London Times*, February 25, 1861, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>34</sup> “Central Criminal Court, Feb. 27,” *London Times*, February 28, 1861, *The Times Digital Archive*.

in the house were drunk, the legal system and therefore the media was more lenient. The second article features very little on the nature of the crime, which seemed odd because its level of cruelty would typically have been heavily sensationalized. Because the article focused on alcohol influencing Sullivan's sentencing as opposed to any agency she had in her actions, what would have typically been viewed as a gruesome act of violence was downplayed as a drunken mistake.

There were only a two instances in the *Times* where women and their alcohol use was treated in a particularly harsh light, with Catherine Donovan in 1847 and Margaret Smith in 1880. Donovan's manslaughter charge came about after she drunkenly stumbled into a seven-year-old boy on the side of the road, accidentally pushing him in front of an oncoming wagon that struck and killed him instantly.<sup>35</sup> Donovan was first introduced as someone "who [had] been in frequent custody for disorderly and violent conduct," and she claimed she had no memory of the incident.<sup>36</sup> She was found guilty of manslaughter, and sentenced to three months of hard labor. Her sentencing was relatively similar to other cases of drunken manslaughter, but the language used to describe her character was significantly less sympathetic than that of other cases, most likely because her drinking was not a new problem for the legal system. Margaret Smith's arrest for the death of her 15-month-old daughter was only detailed in a short paragraph, which claimed that "the prisoner was constantly the worse for drink and had neglected to provide food for the child," as well as implied a history with the legal system.<sup>37</sup> The article also claimed that Smith continued to spend her money on alcohol and when her daughter caught pneumonia, creating the idea of a habitual drunk who would not care for her child in her weakest state. Both

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<sup>35</sup> "Police," *London Times*, May 29, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> "Margaret Smith, 40, married, was charged on remand—," *London Times*, October 21, 1880, *The Times Digital Archive*.

Donovan and Smith had a record of causing problems with their drinking, and their repeated use of alcohol creating disturbances generated far less sympathy in the *Times* than other women.

Using excessive drinking as a legal defense was commonplace for essentially all types of murders, but a criminal's own history with drinking was a significant factor in determining the amount of sympathy they generated in the *Times*. While some women were able to escape harsher punishments by using the idea that it was drink, not their own agency, that drove them to kill, other women could not use this excuse because their drinking had a record of disturbing the legal system. The *Times* followed the court's opinions on alcohol-related crimes, never doubting a woman's guilt but instead characterizing them as almost a different person in their sober state. Revoking a woman's agency in her own crime, regardless of her alcohol intake, furthered the idea that female murderers were not all hardened criminals but instead women who accidentally made mistakes out of their control.

*"She [said] she had only acted on her defence [sic], showing... bruises on her arms and a lump on the bone of one of her cheeks."*

*Murder as Self-Defense*<sup>38</sup>

While the *Times* does not offer enough details in every case to determine the exact number of women claiming self-defense in either abusive relationships or drunken bar fights, this research approximately twelve women who used this characterization in their trials from 1805 to 1880. Not every instance of women killing their husbands, lovers, or friends characterized the murderer as acting out of necessity, but the idea of murder for self-preservation was common. Women primarily used self-defense when found guilty of killing their husbands, fiancés, or

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<sup>38</sup> "Central Criminal Court, Jan. 15," *London Times*, January 16, 1873, *The Times Digital Archive*.



partners. Instances of women killing other women in self-defense were present as well, but were reported on less often and tended to have less detail. This could be because these altercations were usually in-the-heat-of-the-moment and primarily the result excessive drinking. Violent fights between women could have also generated less media attention because the women were usually of the same social standing, but men and women in the same socioeconomic class were still subjected to a gendered hierarchy; meaning women who killed men were defying a social rank, even if they were from the same economic background.

The *Times* heavily relied on the court's witness testimony to establish the relationship between the murderer and victim in order to convince or sway the reader's belief of justifiable homicide. Landlords, neighbors, and family members were quoted throughout articles, primarily in the article's set-up of how the crime was committed. Mary Ann Moriarty argued that she killed her husband in self-defense when he drunkenly attacked her, and her landlord supported her argument when he testified that "he had long known the deceased, and had never seen him sober but once."<sup>39</sup> Some witnesses were not given a direct relationship to the murderer or victim, but their testimony was used to gage the murderer's feelings about their crime. Catherine Nolan accidentally killed her husband in an argument, but immediately following the fight "begged a witness at once to run for a doctor," testimony the *Times* included to show her remorse.<sup>40</sup> These witnesses were not used to confirm or deny that a woman was guilty, but instead used to show the character of both the murderer and the victim. The *Times* obviously viewed this testimony as valuable to the overall understanding of the crime, as adult-on-adult murder had less press attention but this character testimony was almost always included.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "Central Criminal Court, Aug. 20," *London Times*, August 21, 1862, *The Times Digital Archive*.

The most noteworthy case of murder as a form of self-defense came with the 1848 trial of Annette Meyers, who was found guilty of her fiancé's murder. This case did not necessarily signal a shift in the media's treatment of self-defense, but instead was often used in debates regarding capital punishment. Meyers's case placed her in eight articles, which included pieces by both the *Times* as well as outside readers about her death sentence and the morality of capital punishment. The first article calls for harsh punishment, stating "[society has] laws to protect life, and Annette Meyers will feel them," but the following articles take a different tone.<sup>41</sup> Meyers was found to have killed her fiancé because of a history of abuse and neglect, including being forced into sex work, and her case quickly generated public sympathy.<sup>42</sup> Three letters to the editor from various citizens claimed that "if Annette Meyers be sent to the scaffold, the public [would have regarded] it in no other light than of legal murder."<sup>43</sup> While the jury recommended mercy, the judge sentenced Meyers to death, but even the first report of sentencing seemed skeptical that the punishment would be carried out.<sup>44</sup> The day after her sentence, the *Times* reported a petition to the Queen circulating around London to reduce Meyers' sentence. A letter to the editor promoted the petition, and one compliments the way the *Times* covered the story to draw in public attention.<sup>45</sup> Meyers was viewed as a woman of circumstance, driven to kill because of the emotional strain she endured in an abusive relationship; this characterization of a "poor girl" acting in self-defense fueled public sympathy.

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<sup>41</sup> "His Excellency Monsignor Bedini has just arrived," *London Times*, February 14, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>42</sup> "Annette Meyers," *London Times*, March 8, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>43</sup> H.R.D, "The Case of Annette Meyers," *London Times*, March 7, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>44</sup> "House of Commons, Monday, March 6," *London Times*, March 7, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*. Also see: B.A, "Annette Meyers," *London Times*, March 8, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>45</sup> W.K, "To the Editor of the *Times*," *London Times*, March 9, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

Contextualization was present for every type of murder reported in the *Times*, but the idea of women being forced into violent crime in order to save themselves was common in many instances of women killing other adults. Witness testimony, used to establish the nature of a relationship before the crime, was also used by the *Times* to justify a self-defense claim and a jury's recommendation for mercy.<sup>46</sup> By emphasizing these relationships, the media removed some of the offenders' agency in their crimes. Self-defense was not a legal classification of murder in the Old Bailey, but its presence in the *Times* shows how the idea of women being forced into violence for their own safety was a common justification for murder.

*“Sir,— Often as I have read ‘The Times’ with approbation and satisfaction, I have never done so with livelier feelings of both than those experienced on... your leading article upon the trial and condemnation of Annette Meyers.”*

*Criminals, Fame, and Justification for Reform*<sup>47</sup>

The repeal of the Bloody Codes in the 1830s and a new shift in criminal punishment allowed for the sensational celebrity like never before. By 1840, only four criminal acts could be punished with hanging, and transportation and penitentiaries were instated in its place.<sup>48</sup> Instead of trials primarily leading to the death penalty, sentencing became a new avenue within the legal system, and therefore a new part of crime reporting. The articles found in the *Times* hardly concern if a woman was guilty or innocent; instead pieces written by and to the *Times* regarding famous trial usually focus on how the woman should be punished. Juries and judges would be critiques for being too hard or too lenient, with some cases creating enough stir for Queen

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<sup>46</sup> Callahan, 1014.

<sup>47</sup> W.K., “To the Editor of the *Times*,” *London Times*, March 9, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>48</sup> Casey, 371.

Victoria to allow a royal pardon. The *Times* reported on punishment as an undetermined part of a trial, where death was previously used to punish essentially all criminal acts.

Similar to the ways modern criminals can become subjects of a media circus, the *Times* portrayed a handful of offenders in such a way that their names became synonymous with their crimes. Following Mary Furley's 1844 trial for killing her illegitimate son, as detailed in the section on infant murder, women like Sarah Gale (1837), Mary Ann Hunt (1847), Annette Meyers (1848), Celestina Somner (1856), Marguerite Dixblanc (1872), and Christiana Edmunds (1872) all became the subjects of multiple articles detailing their trials, as well as some letters from readers about their cases. Christiana Edmunds, Annette Meyers, and Mary Ann Hunt were all mentioned in a 1913 letter to the editor about reforming the jury systems, showing their lasting impact on the legal and social world around crime.<sup>49</sup>

The first woman to receive a celebrity status in the *Times* was Sarah Gale, who appeared in nine articles in 1837 following the murder of Hannah Brown.<sup>50</sup> Gale was a cook for James Greenacre, and was accused of helping him murder a woman he impregnated. Gale is arrested on the run with her four-year-old daughter, who was later kept imprisoned with her.<sup>51</sup> The article primarily placed Greenacre in the spotlight and Gale as a secondary character; Gale was not portrayed as guilty of the direct murder, but instead as a willing accomplice in disposing the body and fleeing authorities.<sup>52</sup> The majority of the articles follow Gale's transportation to New South Wales following a failure to prove her direct connection to the murder. Her transportation was considered important enough to justify press attention long after her trial ended, even

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<sup>49</sup> Harry B. Poland, "The Reform of the Jury System," *London Times*, February 22, 1913, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>50</sup> "The Edgeware-Road Murder—Final Examination and Committal of Greenacre and Gale to Newgate," *London Times*, April 6, 1837, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>51</sup> "The Edgeware-Road Murder," *London Times*, March 28, 1837, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>52</sup> "The Edgeware-Road Murder," *London Times*, April 13, 1837, *The Times Digital Archive*.

generating a crowd to see her off.<sup>53</sup> The articles detailing her transportation hardly include any description of her crime, most likely because the author thought the readers would already know what she was accused of. Gale's nine articles only spanned the time of less than two full months, but her popularity can be easily seen in the constant updates given about her trial and sentencing. Because so few articles concerning the English criminal system's female murderers appeared in the *Times* before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gale can be considered one of the *Times*' first criminal-celebrities in 1837.

A decade later, the *Times* covered the conviction of Mary Ann Hunt for the murder of her female flat-mate. The first article about Hunt depicts her as cruel and unforgiving, giving a graphic description of how police believed the murder occurred.<sup>54</sup> This detail would not have been out of place for the time for 1847, as the general public was exposed to detailed criminal accounts in various forms of media. Hunt is found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, one of the only crimes still punished with hanging. But once the "wretched criminal" claims to be pregnant, the language surrounding her sentencing shifts from justified death to a call for mercy, thrusting her into the spotlight.<sup>55</sup> The *Times* received a letter from a man claiming to be a medical professional stressing the importance of making sure Hunt was really pregnant before sentencing, showing how engaged the public was in her trial.<sup>56</sup> Hunt's sentence was eventually reduced to imprisonment at Newgate by Queen Victoria, but her case did not fade from the

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<sup>53</sup> "On Monday morning about 20 female convicts were removed from Newgate to the hulk off Woolwich, there to—," *London Times*, June 28, 1837, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Sarah Gale, the woman who was tried with Greenacre, was yesterday morning removed from Newgate to—," *London Times*, June 27, 1837, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>54</sup> "The Murder in Marylebone," *London Times*, Jun 5, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>55</sup> "The Marylebone Murder—Mary Ann Hunt," *London Times*, September 7, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Barnes, M.B, "The Case of Mary Ann Hunt," *London Times*, October 5, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

public mind for decades.<sup>57</sup> She was mentioned in the 1848 case of Annette Meyers in an article about a movement to end capital punishment, as well as a 1913 letter to the editor about a new bill to reform the jury system.<sup>58</sup> None of the articles about Hunt questioned her innocence, but she was used as the face of punishment reform because her possible pregnancy showed a risk in executing convicts. Her pregnancy granted her a twisted fame in the English criminal justice system, overruling her actual crime to instead use her as the face of capital punishment's risks.

Annette Meyers was found guilty of her fiancé's murder in 1848, furthering the question of capital punishment's placement in English society following Hunt's case. Meyers, whose story is detailed in the section on murder as self-defense, gained celebrity status because her case and its results came in the height of criminal reform. Two women were convicted of manslaughter between Hunt and Meyers, but they were sentenced to imprisonment instead of death and did not generate more than two articles each about their crimes.<sup>59</sup> Meyers' case placed her in eight articles, and much like Hunt, they included pieces by and to the *Times* about her death sentence and the morality of capital punishment. Meyers and Hunt were mentioned together in a two articles, as Meyers' case used Hunt's very recent pardon as a model and continued the debate around capital punishment.<sup>60</sup> Meyers was granted celebrity status because her case caught the attention of Queen Victoria in the same way Hunt became popular with the general public. Their cases occurred only a year apart during the end of the 1840s, one of the main decades for criminal reform. It is no surprise that the public wanted to follow Hunt and

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<sup>57</sup> "Court of Alderman," *London Times*, November 9, 1847, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>58</sup> Harry B. Poland, "The Reform of the Jury System," *London Times*, February 22, 1913, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Abolition of Capital Punishment," *London Times*, March 9, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>59</sup> "Old Court," *London Times*, November 1, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Horrible Occurrence," *London Times*, November 29, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Old Court," *London Times*, December 21, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>60</sup> Harry B. Poland, "The Reform of the Jury System," *London Times*, February 22, 1913, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Abolition of Capital Punishment," *London Times*, March 9, 1848, *The Times Digital Archive*.

Meyers's cases given the political debates surrounding capital punishment, transportation, and imprisonment.

The *Times* did not see another out-of-the-ordinary criminal case until 1856, when Celestina Somner was convicted of killing her ten-year-old illegitimate daughter. In Somner's cases, three of the four times her name appears in the *Times* it is found in letters to the editor comparing her crime and punishment to the women before her. Somner's case carries a public weight unlike any case since Annette Meyers, adding her to the list of celebrity criminals. She was convicted of killing her daughter to avoiding having to pay for her housing, and because Somner had been married for two years but the child was ten years old, the girl was viewed as illegitimate.<sup>61</sup> Even into the 1850s, the *Times* was receiving letters about the use and morality of capital punishment. Some called for Somner to be killed because her crimes were worse than those of other women put to death, and the letters often referenced and rebutted one another.<sup>62</sup> Although Somner killed her illegitimate child, she was not viewed the same way as women convicted of infanticide because her daughter was ten years old; she was therefore characterized as particularly evil, which explains why the public developed such strong opinions about her case. Somner's crime shows that not only were debates surrounding capital punishment a common theme in criminal reporting, but that the public was interested in these cases enough to have strong opinions.

The *Times* did not see another famous case until 1872, when Marguerite Dixblanc became the subject of an international manhunt following the murder of her mistress, Madame

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<sup>61</sup> "A Cabinet Council was held yesterday after—," *London Times*, February 20, 1856, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>62</sup> Frederick Mallett, "The Late Execution at Dorchester," *London Times*, August 16, 1856, *The Times Digital Archive*. H.N. Cox, "The Late Execution at Dorchester," *London Times*, August 13, 1856, *The Times Digital Archive*.

Riel.<sup>63</sup> After committing “one of the most daring crimes which have been perpetrated in the metropolis for many years,” Dixblanc used her French citizenship to easily flee across the English Channel.<sup>64</sup> Seven articles followed Dixblanc around Europe, with her near-arrest in France and eventual capture in Belgium.<sup>65</sup> International leaders, including the Belgian diplomat to England, wrote about her capture, making Dixblanc the only female murderer present in the *Times* to garner this level of international attention.<sup>66</sup> Dixblanc, who was not an English citizen, was unlike any criminal celebrity, as her fame primarily came from how long it took authorities to capture her. And, like other infamous women, she was used for political ammunition. The unnamed author of the first report on Dixblanc used her previous entrance into England to argue “how little utility the passport system has been in keeping out suspicious characters.”<sup>67</sup> While her crime itself was not necessarily different than other female murderers, her daring escape across Europe created a celebrity status large enough for her crime to be politicized ever so slightly.

But perhaps the best example of the crime celebrity is that of Christiana Edmunds, who was accused of attempting to poison three people and successfully poisoning a child in 1871. Nineteen articles traced her accusation, trial, sentence, and life in various asylums from late 1871 to mid-1872. Poisoning was an uncommon murder method, allowing Edmunds to be thrust into the spotlight even before more details came out about her mental condition. This particular poisoning case also garnered attention because Edmunds sent cakes made with arsenic to two

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<sup>63</sup> “The Murder in Park-Lane,” *London Times*, April 12, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Escape to France: “The Murder in Park-Lane,” *London Times*, April 15, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. Escape to Belgium: “News in Brief,” *London Times*, April 20, 1872. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>66</sup> Special Correspondent, “France,” *London Times*, April 15, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. “News in Brief,” *London Times*, April 20, 1872. *The Times Digital Archive*. Van De Velde, First Secretary to the Belgian Legation, “The Extradition of Marguerite Dixblanc,” *London Times*, April 25, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>67</sup> “The Murder in Park-Lane,” *London Times*, April 15, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.



women, one of which was the wife of a doctor she was said to be in love with.<sup>68</sup> Two women, the doctor, and a young boy consumed the cakes; and when the young boy died, Edmunds earned a murder charge.<sup>69</sup> The fourth article published about Edmunds focused not on her crimes, but the ways she claimed to be treated in jail during the trial.<sup>70</sup> This article generated enough concern about her treatment that a caretaker at the jail wrote a response for the *Times*, claiming that any accusations of maltreatment were false; other articles about prisoners in the same jail mentioned Edmunds' case when describing how well inmates were treated.<sup>71</sup> When her trial was postponed, the *Times* still published updates on its upcoming date and summaries of the crimes, as if to remind readers that the case was coming soon.<sup>72</sup> When she was eventually found guilty, doctors and medical professionals wrote letters to the editor stressing that her mental state must be examined; and when she was found to be a "criminal lunatic," readers were updated on which asylums she was placed in.<sup>73</sup> And, as if following a trend for famous female murderers, Edmunds claimed she was pregnant and generated public outcry to reexamine her sentencing; with one letter to the editor even mentioning Mary Ann Hunt.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "The Alleged Poisoning At Brighton," *London Times*, September 8, 1871, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>69</sup> "Winter Assizes," *London Times*, December 23, 1871, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>70</sup> "Judges' Chambers," *London Times*, December 30, 1871, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>71</sup> "The Brighton Poisoning Case," *London Times*, January 1, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Prison Made Easy— 'Gentlemen' awaiting," *London Times*, January 27, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>72</sup> "The Brighton Poisoning Case," *London Times*, January 5, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Central Criminal Court," *London Times*, January 6, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Central Criminal Court, Jan. 8," *London Times*, January 9, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Central Criminal Court, Jan. 9," *London Times*, January 10, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "Central Criminal Court, Jan. 10," *London Times*, January 11, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>73</sup> "We are authorized to state that in consequence," *London Times*, January 25, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "The Manchester Poisoning Case," *London Times*, January 26, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "House of Commons," *London Times*, May 11, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>74</sup> For a reference to Mary Ann Hunt see: "The Convict Christina Edmunds," *London Times*, January 17, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. For public outcry see both: "We are authorized to state that in consequence," *London Times*, January 25, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*. "The Manchester Poisoning Case," *London Times*, January 26, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

Edmunds, like every other famous female murderer, was cited in over a dozen articles who used her case as a call for political action on a variety of topics. The idea of executing a possibly pregnant woman, as mentioned in the Hunt and Meyers cases, quickly faded from Edmunds' story because she was found to be criminally insane.<sup>75</sup> Her insanity diagnosis placed her in a variety of asylums, as well as started a debate over who pays for housing the mentally incapacitated.<sup>76</sup> Politicians mentioned Edmunds' recent case when debating if the state or the family of a "criminal lunatic" should foot the bill.<sup>77</sup> Others focused on how much poison Edmunds was able to access in order to commit her crime, using her case as justification for reforming the Sale of Poison Act of 1865 to prevent the forgery loophole that allowed Edmunds access to her weapons.<sup>78</sup> Edmunds' fame turned her into the face of a variety of causes, her image used to justify reform in both crime and punishment by creating a new face of violence—she transformed into a mythological monster instead of her reality of a mentally ill woman who committed a crime. While all of these women were found guilty of their crimes, the fame they generated in both social and political circles changed how their violence was understood.

### *Conclusion*

The women placed in the *London Times*' spotlight from 1805 to 1880 were not necessarily guilty of groundbreaking crimes— but their media presence in such a widely-circulated publication was a new phenomenon. The *Times* was consumed across class lines, meaning the stories and their implications spread to all layers of London.<sup>79</sup> Following the repeal

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<sup>75</sup> "House of Commons, Friday, May 10," *London Times*, May 11, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> "House of Commons, Monday, May 13," *London Times*, May 14, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>78</sup> "Grand Day At the Middle Temple," *London Times*, January 26, 1872, *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>79</sup> Casey, 369.

of the Bloody Codes in the 1830s and 1840s led to a significant drop in instances of capital punishment, and a spike in crime and trial reporting to satisfy a public desire.<sup>80</sup> The *Times* responded to this new demand for violent detail by categorizing the few women found guilty of murder into various groupings for public consumption.

The various tropes violent female offenders were sorted into, from the manic mother to the disorderly drunk to the vengeful victim, helped the *Times* explain crime and punishment to the general public. But, these categories had lasting impacts on the way Western society viewed violent women. Sarah Gale's violent acts with a male companion and her demure court appearances mirrors those of Amanda Knox. Celestine Somner can be seen in Casey Anthony, as both women were accused of killing their children and faced overwhelming animosity from the public. Mary Furley and Harriet Longley can be viewed as the first versions of Andrea Yates, as all three women drowned their children in episodes of mental instability after their cries for help were ignored, eliciting public demand for mercy. And Christina Edmunds' breaks from reality and subsequent infamy resemble Aileen Wuornos. The tropes created for English women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the *London Times* carry a lasting impact on the way the Western world views violent women, using their crimes as entertainment.

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<sup>80</sup> Casey, 370.

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