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MURDER BECOMES HER: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MURDEROUS  
WOMEN IN AMERICA FROM 1890-1920

by

Emily M. Crumpton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

MURDER BECOMES HER:  
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MURDEROUS WOMEN IN AMERICA FROM  
1890-1920

by

Emily M. Crumpton, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Dr. Victoria Grieve  
Department: History

At the turn of the twentieth century, newspapers endorsed the separation of public and private spheres in terms of gender. However, the actions of murderous, criminally insane women challenged popular gender norms, complicating the simple dualistic delineation of social arenas. Examination of newspaper reports about murderous women reveals that behavior and mental competence, as well as gender, factored into the division of public and private spheres and affected the processes of criminal punishment. Stories of murderous women captivated audiences and provided journalists opportunities to exploit normative human perceptions. Sensationalized stories of lethal ladies between 1890 and 1920 shaped public perceptions of gender, crime, mental illness, and substantiated the perceived “need” for separate spheres.

(98 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## MURDER BECOMES HER:

## MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MURDEROUS WOMEN IN AMERICA FROM

1890-1920

Emily M. Crumpton

This thesis explores the relationship between the media, murderous women, and the concept of separate spheres. Murderous women challenged established gender norms. They did not conform to the societal expectations of their gender, therefore, they were not considered “normal.” As such, women like Alice Mitchell, Jane Toppan, and Amy Archer Gilligan became objects of media, medical, and public curiosity. As defined by medical science and society, newspapers policed the boundaries of “normality” by sensationalizing the lives, actions, and trials of deadly damsels. Newspaper coverage of murderous women reminded the public of the consequences of “abnormality” and non-conformity. This thesis argues that sensationalized stories of lethal ladies between 1890 and 1920 shaped public perceptions of gender, crime, mental illness, and substantiated the perceived “need” for separate spheres. Furthermore, it gives a voice to a group of historical women who existed on the fringes of society.

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To my parents, Danial and Kelly Peck, thank you for instilling in me a love of education and an appreciation for learning.

Finally, to the person whose support I will never be able to express enough gratitude for, my grandmother, Marie McTeer. While I pursued my degree in a different state, she cared for and saw to the needs of my children. Without her, I would not have been able to complete this thesis or earn my degree. Words cannot express the depth of my appreciation for all she has done for my family and me.

~ Emily Marie Crumpton

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, newspapers endorsed the separation of public and private spheres in terms of gender. However, the actions of murderous, criminally insane women challenged popular gender norms, complicating the simple dualistic delineation of social arenas. Examination of newspaper reports about murderous women reveals that behavior and mental competence, as well as gender, factored into the division of public and private spheres and affected the processes of criminal punishment. At the turn of the twentieth century, controversy, gossip, morbidity, and scandal filled the media. By committing violent crimes and challenging socially accepted gender roles, deadly damsels met the criteria necessary to receive mass media attention. Stories of murderous women captivated audiences and provided journalists opportunities to exploit normative human perceptions. Sensationalized stories of lethal ladies between 1890 and 1920 shaped public perceptions of gender, crime, mental illness, and substantiated the perceived “need” for separate spheres.

Newspapers articles about three murderous women—Alice Mitchell, Jane Toppan, and Amy Archer Gilligan—fill the bulk of primary sources referenced and analyzed in this thesis. The selection of newspapers was not limited by publication or geographic location. This lack of restriction made it possible to demonstrate the extent and distance to which reports about murderous women spread and allowed for comparisons of reporting styles and practices. Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan received media attention for their crimes in three separate, but consecutive, decades. Restricting research to a specified date range (1890-1920) allowed for a closer analysis of social

continuities and changes related to the concept of separate spheres as shaped by mass media. In addition to newspapers, this study examines other primary source materials, such as novels, medical journals, and historical academic publications.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis focuses on the ways newspapers functioned in shaping popular opinion through the operation of journalistic storytelling. As examined in the following chapters, narrative construction, word choice, the incorporation of illustrations, and other media techniques contributed to the popularity of particular news topics. Moreover, sensationalism was a defining feature of popular newspapers and an important media tool at the time Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan committed their crimes. Successfully employed, sensationalism had the power to instigate social change, incite moral panic, and entertain readers while simultaneously increasing newspaper profits.<sup>2</sup> As seen in reports about murderous women, through the exploitation of readers' emotions (typically that of shock), sensationalism functioned as a rhetorical device that defined "normality" by stressing the consequences of nonconformity.

Sensationalism did not solely rely on evoking reactions of shock to arouse emotional responses in readers. By using sentimental language and sympathetic tones, journalists attempted to manipulate readers' emotions in order to prompt public support for social reform movements, arguably the most notable being Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Madhouse* series. Sympathy and sentimentality gave journalists and reformers the power

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<sup>1</sup> Most primary sources were accessed through various online databases including, but not limited to, Archive.org, Chroniclingamerica.loc.org, Genealogybank.com, Newspapers.com, and Trove.nla.gov.au.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Brazil, "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America," *American Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 163–64.

to enact change.<sup>3</sup>

Not all women who committed murder between 1890 and 1920 received the same amount of media attention as Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan. Arguably, the nature of their crimes, positions in society, and/or chosen professions in conjunction with their biological sex contributed to their macabre celebrity status. Each chapter highlights one woman and her crimes, and identifies distinct ways in which journalists approached the topics of gender, crime, mental health, criminal punishment, and separate spheres.

Chapter two examines newspaper coverage about Alice Mitchell. In January 1892, in Memphis, Tennessee, Mitchell slit the throat of her lover, Freda Ward. Newspaper coverage of Mitchell's crime reveals the role newspapers played in the masculinization of violent crime and the delineation of social spheres as determined by mental competence or incompetence. Due to the nature of Mitchell's crime and high profile trial, newspaper coverage of the events provided the American public the opportunity to engage in discourses of gender and sexuality. The characteristics of "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity," defined the boundaries of "true womanhood" in the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell's actions, including before and after the murder, violated the socially-constructed confines of her gender. In order to understand her actions within the context of American Victorian culture, journalists positioned Mitchell in a way that made her appear more masculine than feminine. This chapter argues that as endorsed through and by media outlets, late-nineteenth-century social spheres delineated

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women's Business* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2016), 7–11.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, Part 1 (Summer 1966): 152.

along lines of mental competence-or incompetence-were validated by scientific and medical “knowledge.”

Chapter three examines media coverage about serial killer Jane Toppan. As a professional nurse she had access to a large number of potential (and actual) victims. By examining newspaper narratives and illustrations, this chapter argues that popular printed media (literary and visual) about murderous women perpetuated ideas of the mentally ill as unsafe justifying their incarceration in asylums and hospitals. Communication specialists have identified patterns in current media regarding mentally ill and criminal women. In a recent study, Jessie M. Quintero Johnson and Bonnie Miller examined depictions of mentally ill murderous women in three current and popular media formats: news outlets, a movie, and soap operas. Johnson and Miller concluded that the media format determined how producers of popular media presented various interpretations of criminally insane women.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Pauline K. Brennan and Abby L. Vandenberg analyzed how criminal women are portrayed in current popular media and found that the media separated female criminals into groups of either “bad” or “mad/sad’ women.”<sup>6</sup> As reflected in this thesis, the patterns identified in media narratives by Johnson, Miller, Brennan, and Vandenberg are not new. These patterns and formulas for narrative construction appear in historical journalistic narratives about criminally insane murderous women, demonstrating how particular media practices and techniques have persisted over time.

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<sup>5</sup> Jessie M. Quintero Johnson and Bonnie Miller, “When Women ‘Snap’: The Use of Mental Illness to Contextualize Women’s Acts of Violence in Contemporary Popular Media,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 2 (2016): 211–27.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline K. Brennan and Abby L. Vandenberg, “Depictions of Female Offenders in Front-Page Newspaper Stories: The Importance of Race/Ethnicity,” *International Journal of Social Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2009): 145.

Chapter four addresses the issue of capital punishment, female criminals, and the role of “sympathy” in sensational media by examining newspaper articles about Amy Archer Gilligan. Newspapers described Gilligan’s crimes as “the most gigantic poisoning plot that ever shocked New England” and perceived her trial as “much greater than the case of nurse Jane Toppan, fifteen years ago.” Like Toppan, Gilligan was a serial killer. Officials accused Gilligan of using arsenic to poison the patients in her convalescence home.<sup>7</sup> Of the three murderous women addressed in this thesis, Gilligan was the only woman sentenced to death. However, with the help of her daughter (Mary Archer), social reformers, and sympathetic media, Gilligan secured an appeal. During the appeal Gilligan pled insanity and received a life sentence in an asylum rather than execution. Media coverage about Gilligan and her daughter, Mary, demonstrated how murderous women who claimed “insanity” complicated questions pertaining to criminal responsibility, moral agency, and the death penalty. Like most political topics, newspapers usually supported one side or the other on the issue of the capital punishment. In order to rally support for the cause, newspapers that supported the abolition of capital punishment utilized sentimental language and sympathetic tones in stories about criminals sentenced to death. Newspapers that supported the death penalty used fear based language and aggressive tones in order to justify the practice. However, the success of pro- and/or anti-death penalty articles depended on the readers’ ability to sympathize with the reporters’ feelings of “fear or resentment” or compassion.<sup>8</sup> This chapter examines the relationship

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<sup>7</sup> “Says Mrs. Gilligan Is Slayer of Many,” *The New York Sun*, May 12, 1916.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Leslie Abramson, *Sob Sister Journalism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 2–4; Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women’s Business*, 7–11; Jean Marie Lutes, “Sob Sister Revisited,” *American Literary History* 15, no. 3

between “sympathy” and newspaper reports about capital punishment and argues that by advocating for the abolition of capital punishment for both sane and insane individuals, even indirectly, both reformers and newspapers justified the “need” for separate spheres.

Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan each gained international media attention for their crimes and all three avoided the death penalty due to diagnoses or claims of “insanity.” Their stories reveal how murderous women challenged established gender norms, pushed the boundaries of “normality,” and inspired the imaginations of the American public. Their actions were gruesome, violent, and disturbing. The topic of deadly women is one that many people are uncomfortable researching and discussing, possibly because violent and criminal women continue to challenge concepts of social spheres and femininity. The controversial reactions they invoke—both in the past and today—make murderous women worthy of deeper historical investigation. To only research and analyze the histories of people who have made “positive” contributions to society creates gaps in historical memory and suppresses the voices of large populations of people. Overlooking or ignoring the history of any group because the topics or themes that arise are “uncomfortable” or “unpleasant” is an act of academic negligence. Furthermore, analyzing the history of American media through the lens of murderous women helps historicize journalistic narratives and other topics not thoroughly explored by scholars.

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(Autumn 2003): 504–5; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Ninth (London: A. Strahan, 1801), 6–7.

## CHAPTER II

## “MISFIT AFFECTION”: MADNESS, MURDER, AND GENDER

During the late-nineteenth century, a distinct set of Victorian cultural values helped shape white middle-class views of American femininity. “Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” defined the characteristics middle-class society expected women to develop.<sup>9</sup> Some of the values included postponing or denying sexual gratification, ongoing self-improvement, and sexual repression.<sup>10</sup> In addition, due to the perceived nature of their sex, a common belief existed that women were less inclined than men toward violence. Late-nineteenth-century science supported this gender stereotype. However, discourse does not completely define behavior.<sup>11</sup> Women who deviated from the socially-constructed confines of their gender, especially those who engaged in violent criminal activity, crossed these perceived boundaries. As a result, many were socially ostracized or accused of insanity. Alice Mitchell experienced both. Because her sexuality seemingly demonstrated a rejection of “true womanhood,” and due to her unusual behavior after the murder, doctors declared her insane, justifying Mitchell’s incarceration in an asylum rather than in a jail or penitentiary. Journalists, in order to better understand her behavior within the context of their culture, constructed narratives that masculinized Mitchell instead of feminizing violence. The masculinization of criminal activity molded both the literal and figurative conceptions of separate spheres

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<sup>9</sup> Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 152.

<sup>10</sup> Mabel Collins Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 35–44.

<sup>11</sup> Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60–61; Daniel Walker Howe, “American Victorianism as Culture,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975): 524.

that existed within American society during the 1890s. Endorsed through and by media outlets, late-nineteenth-century social spheres delineated along lines of mental competence-or incompetence-were validated by scientific and medical “knowledge.”

Historically, those who existed within “private” spheres tended to lack adequate public representation and were beholden to those who publically represented or spoke on their behalf. As such, the “public representative” maintained a certain degree of power over their “subordinate.” In other words, a portion of a subordinate individual’s personal agency was turned over to their public representative. The misapplication or misuse of power by the public representative, and the social acceptance of such behavior, often led to “othering” and/or the oppression of distinct groups of people. Often sanctioned by religious beliefs and legitimized by political ideologies, this division has primarily been understood to occur along gender lines. In nineteenth-century American society, men filled the role of “public representatives” for women. However, other “spheres” existed within American society such as class, race, religion, profession, and mental competence. Each “sphere” shaped particular notions of gender. Likewise, “gender” affected the development of various social spheres.

Concepts pertaining to gender and separate spheres shaped late-nineteenth-century medical understandings of mental health. The masculinization of violent and criminal behavior aided in the feminization of mental illness and vice versa. Treatment and incarceration of the criminal and mentally ill has a long and complex history. Historically, medical professionals considered certain illnesses, such as “mania” and “melancholy,” masculine disorders. Prior to the eighteenth-century, female madness was explained in terms of religious insanity, but by the mid-eighteenth-century, during the



“age of sensibility,” this line of thought changed. Mania, melancholy, and hysteria became associated primarily with female diseases. That is not to say that men were not susceptible to such ailments. On the contrary, they were simply less likely to receive diagnoses related to those types of mental/emotional conditions. More women received diagnoses of mental illness than men, while men were more likely to receive prison sentences for criminal activity. Likewise, treating sexual perversion in women as a mental illness resulted in asylum confinement rather than prison incarceration. By the nineteenth-century it was considered “rational” to confine the mentally ill. Furthermore, “the application of rational thought to problems could restrain irrational acts.” Therefore, many believed that violent tendencies, among other negative behaviors, could be “controlled by superior” intellect and rational thought.<sup>12</sup> Removed from the community, incarcerated within the walls of an asylum or hospital, the mentally ill were stripped of liberty. This segregation led to the creation of three distinct groups: the mentally ill, medical professionals who treated the mad and insane, and “normal” society. As a result, incarceration of the mentally ill created a private sphere that existed within the public domain. Newspaper articles about Alice Mitchell reflected medical perceptions of mental illness, crime, and gender that supported the belief that separate spheres were a social necessity.<sup>13</sup>

On January 26, 1892, “A Red Handed-Murderess” appeared on the front page of

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 131.

<sup>13</sup> Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: The World through the Eyes of the Insane* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 22–23, 104–5; Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 131; Mike Jay, *This Way Madness Lies: The Asylum and Beyond* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 80; Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathon Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 503.

*The Indianapolis Journal*. On the same day, the *Rock Island Daily Argus* published the article “A Girl’s Crime.” Except for the titles, the articles about Mitchell that appeared within the pages of *The Indianapolis Journal* and the *Rock Island Daily Argus* were identical. Filled with morbid excitement, the first line read, “The most sensational tragedy which has occurred in Memphis for years was committed yesterday afternoon.” The details promptly followed. Around four o’clock in the afternoon, while riding in a buggy, Lillie Johnson and Alice Mitchell spotted Freda Ward. Mitchell became excited, exited the buggy, and approached Ward. Then, in broad daylight, Mitchell drew a razor from her pocket and slit Ward’s throat. She then attempted to kill Jo Ward, the victim’s sister, who escaped by tripping Mitchell with an umbrella. The article identified Mitchell and Ward as “familiar figures in society” from wealthy families, then described Mitchell as a “slayer” and alluded to her curious relationship with Ward.<sup>14</sup> Due to the crime’s public and violent nature, and the class status of the murderer and her victim, reporters deemed the event “sensational” and the story spread quickly.

Despite printing the same story, *The Indianapolis Journal* and the *Rock Island Daily Argus* had some professional differences. Like most American newspapers, *The Indianapolis Journal* and the *Rock Island Daily Argus* supported specific political positions, platforms, and ideas.<sup>15</sup> In an editorial advertisement printed on January 27, 1892, *The Indianapolis Journal* declared itself “a Republican newspaper, and sets forth

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<sup>14</sup>“A Red-Handed Murderess,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, January 26, 1892; “A Girl’s Crime,” *Rock Island Daily Argus*, January 26, 1892.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 3, 6–7, 15, 33–37, 40–41; Jennifer E. Moore, “‘Ours Has Been No Pleasing Task’: Sensationalism in Frank Leslie’s Campaign against Swill Milk,” in *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19th-Century Reporting*, ed. David B. Sachsman and David W. Bulla (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 2013), 131.

Republican principles,” but claimed to report “non-partisan” news. It continued, boasting that “it has a corps of Special Correspondents, who give attention to those events and occurrences that are likely to be of particular interest to the Indiana public.”<sup>16</sup> *Rock Island Daily Argus* supported Democratic political views.<sup>17</sup> Yet, despite their political differences, both newspapers printed the same article about Mitchell. The topic of a female murderer transcended political biases.

Mitchell declared that she loved Ward. Journalists confirmed her extreme infatuation and devotion to Ward by reporting the court’s examination of letters exchanged between the young women.<sup>18</sup> American-Victorian doctors perceived Mitchell’s fascination with Ward as a symptom of insanity. One news report quoted General Duke E. Wright, Mitchell’s attorney, who stated, “Alice is insane beyond any doubt, and her insanity, even before killing Freda Ward, was shown in the form of perverted sexual instinct, which led to her infatuation for that young lady.”<sup>19</sup> Upon investigating her past, it became apparent that her “symptoms” had manifested early. As a child Mitchell avoided “girlish diversions” and enjoyed participating in “boyish” activities.<sup>20</sup> Apparently she “could hold her own” against the boys when “climbing trees, shooting at targets with a rifle, and riding horses bareback.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, she was a tomboy. According to *The Milwaukee Journal*, by her late teens, Mitchell “manifested an

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<sup>16</sup> “The Indianapolis Journal,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, January 27, 1892.

<sup>17</sup> *The Portrait and Biographical Album of Rock Island, Illinois* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Company, 1885), 713.

<sup>18</sup> “Wanted to Marry Freda,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, February 1, 1892.

<sup>19</sup> “Alice Mitchell’s Crime,” *The Gastonia Gazette*, February 11, 1892.

<sup>20</sup> “Alice Mitchell’s Case,” *The Daily Herald*, July 23, 1892.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; “Misfit Affection,” *The Aurora Daily Press*, July 19, 1892.

aversion for men and loved a maiden.”<sup>22</sup> These articles indicated that gender separation and the creation of “spheres” as defined by stereotypical behaviors began in childhood.<sup>23</sup>

The murder shocked the public and incited moral panic. On February 1, 1892, an article in *The Indianapolis Journal* told of ministers using Mitchell “as an awful example of what false ideas of right and wrong would drive people to do.” Additionally, crowds of people flooded the jail and court for a chance to glimpse Mitchell.<sup>24</sup> Other reports described Mitchell’s crime and manifestation of madness as “a bombshell into the homes of American civilization.”<sup>25</sup> One article bemoaned, “A sober American community and an unimaginative American court must deal in matter-of-fact fashion with matters which have been discussed hitherto by French writers of fiction only.”<sup>26</sup> Newspapers reported the questions of doctors and psychologists, such as, “Can one woman love another as a man, without being insane, and when this love is reciprocated, are not both insane?” [sic]<sup>27</sup> Such questions suggested that Ward, too, had possibly suffered from some sort of mental illness. In fact, some physicians suggested that this type of love was contagious, and a few news reports insinuated that Lillie Johnson and Jo Ward were involved “beyond mere girlish fancy.”<sup>28</sup> In the nineteenth-century, women commonly developed physical and highly emotional bonds with other women. Physical intimacy between women (hugging, kissing, sleeping in the same bed, etc.) was not considered abnormal or

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<sup>22</sup> “Alice Mitchell on Trial,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 18, 1892.

<sup>23</sup> Analysis on “separate spheres” within the context of childhood is an area of research in need of further investigation by historians

<sup>24</sup> “Didn’t Want Prayers,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, February 1, 1892.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Deveraux, “The Memphis Murder,” *Davenport Daily Leader*, January 26, 1892.

<sup>26</sup> “Because She Loved,” *Rocky Mountain News*, February 5, 1892.

<sup>27</sup> “Loved Like a Man,” *The Times*, July 22, 1892; “A Pair of Lunatics,” *Jackson Weekly Citizen*, July 19, 1892. Rather than ask a question, the article that appeared in the *Jackson Weekly Citizen* directly stated, “Alice loved Freda as a man loves woman, and that Freda loved Alice as woman regards man.”

<sup>28</sup> “Loved Like a Man.”

inappropriate. Such physical affection reflected the perceived innocence of femininity.<sup>29</sup>

The issue that arose within the context of Mitchell and Ward's relationship was not in *how* they showed affection for each other, per se, but that their physical interactions presumably progressed beyond appropriate expressions of chaste feminine intimacy.

According to Victorian cultural beliefs, as supported by late-nineteenth-century doctors, a person's biological sex determined their gender identity and sexual preferences. Those who demonstrated behaviors that countered the "norm" were labeled mad, perverted, or degenerate. However, only the person in the same-sex relationship who took on the role of the opposite gender received diagnoses related to sexual perversion. In a lesbian relationship, for example, the woman who displayed more aggressive, and therefore "masculine," behaviors was deemed deviant. The more passive partner supposedly did not deviate from the expected behaviors of her gender. Medical professionals believed the "passive" female was attracted simply to the "masculine traits" of her female partner. Hence, doctors concluded that once seduced by a man, the passive female would lose interest in her former female partner.<sup>30</sup> Since Mitchell displayed "aggressive" behaviors since childhood, and because she committed a violent crime, lawyers, doctors, and journalists placed Mitchell in the "masculine" role in her

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi*, no. 58/59 (1982): 125–27. In analyzing the role of women "married" to "female husbands," Chauncey described the relationship of the wife to her partner as a "heterosexual paradigm." The wife was still fulfilling her proper gender specified domestic roles. She maintained "the acceptable behavioral and emotional characteristics" of women. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Basic Books, 1994), 13. The "heterosexual paradigm" applied to male homosexual relationships as well. In his book, *Gay New York*, Chauncey stated, "The abnormality (or queerness) of the "fairy," that is, was defined as much by his "woman-like" character or "effeminacy" as his solicitation of male sexual partners; the "man" who responded to his solicitations—no matter how often—was not considered abnormal, a "homosexual," so long as he abided by masculine gender conventions."

relationship with Ward. Had Ward survived her injuries, she probably would not have been labeled “deviant” or diagnosed as insane despite her romantic relationship with another woman.

Within a few weeks, newspapers provided readers with more evidence of Mitchell’s “perverted” gender identity. It seemed possible that Mitchell had a female lover prior to her relationship with Ward. In an interview, Mr. Hubbard recounted the events surrounding a trip Mitchell made to Cincinnati in 1889 to visit his niece, Clara Bailey, Mitchell’s supposed lover. At the time Bailey was fifteen years old. Supposedly during the visit, Mitchell seduced Bailey and “was in various ways making masculine love to Miss Bailey.” Troubled by the events, Bailey confided in her uncle, who, in 1892, reported it to a detective and the newspapers. Sadly, Bailey passed away sometime before the interview and could not corroborate the story.<sup>31</sup> These insinuations, although they could not be verified, added to the sensationalism of Mitchell’s trial and further reinforced for newspaper readers established definitions of “normal” masculine and feminine behaviors.

Shortly after newspapers printed reports about Ward’s death, doctors began to speculate about the possible contagious nature of Mitchell’s “condition.” Within a month, reports of violence between female lovers began surfacing, each tied back to Mitchell’s crime. “Like Alice Mitchell,” and similar articles told of Annie Bryant, a married, middle class woman who took “the part of Miss Mitchell” and threatened to kill Florence Megrue, a “wage-worker,” unless she agreed to marry her. They met in the shop where

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<sup>31</sup> “Insane on Love for Years,” *The Kansas City Times*, February 22, 1892; “Alice Mitchell in Cincinnati,” *The St. Louis Republic*, February 22, 1892; “Miss Mitchell’s Mad Freak,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, February 22, 1892.

Megrue worked. After knowing each other for just a few weeks Megrue received a letter from Bryant which revealed her feelings and deadly intentions. Megrue immediately informed her employers and parents of the letter. When approached about the matter, Bryant denied writing to Megrue and promised to never interact with her again if they agreed not to press charges. Fortunately, no physical harm befell either lady.<sup>32</sup>

For news outlets, comparing Bryant to Mitchell accomplished several things. Controversy, violence, and death, like sex, sells. Nineteenth century newspaper editors recognized that printing controversial and sensational content resulted in increased newspaper sales and circulation. Increased circulation meant higher profits—an indicator of successful newspaper businesses. Next, tying the current event to Mitchell’s case supplemented the sensationalism surrounding her trial and kept particular topics of social concern at the forefront of the readers’ minds. Furthermore, the articles insinuated that both Mitchell and Bryant possessed masculine traits. Like Mitchell, Bryant initiated a relationship with another woman. Thus, the statement “the part of Miss Mitchell” could easily be replaced with “the part of a man.” Finally, distinguishing the class differences between Bryant and Megrue, and placing the story in context with Mitchell, implied that this “condition” was spreading from the top of society to the bottom. At that time, doctors believed that infectious or contagious diseases (including male homosexuality) emerged among the lower classes and immigrant populations then spread upward through the

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<sup>32</sup> “Marry Me,” *The Cincinnati Post*, February 17, 1892; “Like Alice Mitchell,” *The St. Louis Republic*, February 18, 1892; “Imitating Alice Mitchell,” *The Rockford Daily Register-Gazette*, February 18, 1892; “Imitating Alice Mitchell,” *Illinois State Register*, February 19, 1892; “Another of the Alice Mitchell Order,” *Aberdeen Weekly News*, February 19, 1892.

social classes.<sup>33</sup> However, according to evidence found in newspapers, the “spread” of female homosexuality went against the scientifically accepted pattern of contagion. As will be addressed later in this chapter, the top-down pattern of transmission was reinforced through the fear that female education in private schools and convents (a privilege of white middle- and upper-class members of society) exposed virtuous young women to such forms of “moral degeneracy.” Societal position and class could not protect an individual from being affected—or infected—by this perceived ailment.

A few days after Bryant and Megrue’s stories became public, *The Cleveland and Plain Dealer* announced the problem of female perversion was “Becoming Epidemic.”<sup>34</sup> Once again, transmission followed a top-down pattern crossing lines of both class and race. In Mobile, Alabama, “Emma Williams, a black but comely woman of 23,” experienced a bout of “Imitative Insanity” and attacked Eleanora Richardson, a seventeen-year-old “bright mulatto” girl.<sup>35</sup> Motivated by jealousy, “resulting from an unnatural passion similar to the Mitchell-Ward case,” Williams stabbed Richardson seven times.<sup>36</sup> The women had lived together for nearly a year. Williams became upset after Richardson moved in with her sister, and made plans to marry a man. Williams went to the home of Richardson’s sister, and after some quarreling, assaulted the girl. Sadly, like Ward, Richardson succumbed to her wounds.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, references to the color of the girls’ skin and minimal commentary on this

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<sup>33</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> “Becoming Epidemic,” *Cleveland and Plain Dealer*, February 25, 1892.

<sup>35</sup> “Alice Mitchell in Ebony,” *The St. Louis Republic*, February 24, 1892; “Imitative Insanity,” *The Macon Telegraph*, February 25, 1892; “Black Alice Mitchell,” *The Knoxville Journal*, February 25, 1892.

<sup>36</sup> “Alice Mitchell in Ebony.”

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; “She Loved Her,” *The Wheeling Register*, February 25, 1892; “Such Love Is Color Blind,” *The Patriot*, February 25, 1892; “She ‘Fixed’ Her,” *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, February 26, 1892.



crime in “white newspapers” seem indicative of Daniel Walker Howe’s definition of Victorian “didacticism.” Victorian didacticism, according to Howe, differed from racism in that it was based “upon a belief in cultural superiority” rather than “biological superiority.”<sup>38</sup> From this standpoint, newspapers in white communities only commented on Richardson’s murder due to its resemblance to Mitchell’s crime. Further commentary on Williams would have been found in newspapers that serviced black populations and communities. (Unfortunately, due to a lack of access to newspaper databases and archives holding African-American newspapers from the time period, this could not be confirmed. However, African-American newspaper representations of female crime, race, and mental health are areas of research that require further attention from historians.) Application of Howe’s definition of Victorian didacticism in this instance, however, may not be wholly appropriate or accurate.

Williams’s crime took place in Mobile, Alabama, where racial tensions were on the rise. As Robert Rydell shows in his analysis of the world’s fairs in the United States, popular “evolutionary ideas about race and progress” helped institutionalize scientific racism. These attitudes were especially prominent in the layout of the Columbian Exposition at the Chicago World’s fair in 1893. “Living ethnological displays,” or “ethnic villages,” lined the Midway Plaisance. Designers of the exposition intentionally organized the layout of the ethnic villages in a way that “gave a scientific basis to the racial blueprint for building a utopia.” The display of villages moved away from the “White City” divided along lines of race and skin tone (lightest to darkest). Native Americans fell last in line behind Africans (whose subgroups were also divided by skin

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<sup>38</sup> Howe, “American Victorianism as Culture,” 522–23, 527–28.

tone) because anthropologists considered Native American's "culturally distinct" and "racially inferior to other 'types' of humanity."<sup>39</sup> This pattern of racial organization demonstrates the Victorian obsession with "rational order" and suggests that notions of "biological superiority" substantiated Victorian didacticism. Hence, further investigation into Williams' crime may reveal unexamined racist newspaper narratives produced in the American-Victorian South.

Men, too, could fall victim to the violent tendencies of the same "misguided passion" that afflicted the previously mentioned women. In the same week that the presses announced the crimes of Bryant and Williams, another "case of love and its tragic ending that rivals the Alice Mitchell-Freda Ward affair" filled newspaper columns across the country.<sup>40</sup> Several narratives stated, "That the peculiarities of the Alice Mitchell and Freda Ward case at Memphis are not confined to the feminine sex was demonstrated by the suicide here this morning of Dr. E. T. Breedlove of Baltimore, Md."<sup>41</sup> Breedlove had a "strange attachment" to Isaac Judson, in front of whom Breedlove shot himself. Breedlove's suicide note stated he had planned to kill Judson but changed his mind, and instead decided to end his "own miserable existence." The note indicated that Judson's "high ideals of morality" and his "high social and business standing" prevented the two men from being happy together.<sup>42</sup>

*The Morning Call*, a newspaper in San Francisco, ran stories about Breedlove and

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5, 7, Chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> "He Loved a Man," *The Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, February 25, 1892.

<sup>41</sup> "A Male Fool," *The Kansas Weekly Capital*, February 25, 1892; "Deeply Loved His Friend," *The Morning Call*, February 24, 1892.

<sup>42</sup> "Deeply Loved His Friend."

Mitchell in adjacent columns on February 24, 1892.<sup>43</sup> The article about Breedlove provided a possible explanation for his actions. It indicated that he had been “depressed in mind” over financial and professional issues.<sup>44</sup> The placement of the article, in tandem with a story about Mitchell, aided in masculinizing Mitchell, reinforcing the theory of contagion, and supporting notions of homosexuality as a symptom of mental illness, if not as a mental illness in and of itself. However, the article placement did not necessarily feminize Breedlove. Doctors at the turn of the twentieth century viewed male and female homosexuality in different terms. According to George Chauncey, “multiple systems of sexual classification coexisted” among varying cultures, neighborhoods, classes, and professions during the time period.<sup>45</sup> While “a certain degree of masculinity,” in both their sexual and social roles was a required symptom of inversion in women, according to Havelock Ellis, a nineteenth-century English physician who wrote extensively on the topic, men did not have to demonstrate effeminate behavior to receive the same diagnosis or identify as “gay.”<sup>46</sup> Psychologists in the late-nineteenth-century purported that transvestism, homosexual desire, and other forms of male gender inversion existed as conditions independent of each other and “were often practiced by heterosexual men.”<sup>47</sup> Behavioral and emotional expectations of men and women differed, which meant the lines between “appropriate” and “inappropriate,” “normal” and “abnormal” differed. Hence, the list of “symptoms” of homosexuality differed for men and women.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; “Alice Mitchell,” *The Morning Call*, February 24, 1892.

<sup>44</sup> “Deeply Loved His Friend.”

<sup>45</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 13; Chauncey, Jr., “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance,” 123.

<sup>46</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, vol. II (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, Publishers, 1901), 140.

<sup>47</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 124.

Articles featuring male same-sex relationships, such as stories about Breedlove and Field, may not have been as shocking as stories about female same-sex relationships. “The gay male world,” according to Chauncey, “was remarkably visible and integrated into the straight world.” The visibility of the “gay male world” was due, in part, to men’s dominance in the public sphere. This does not mean that late-nineteenth-century American society was more accepting of the gay male world. It simply means that “the public” was aware of certain male subcultures that existed within society. Women did not have access to all of the same public spaces as men, so the lesbian world developed differently than its male counterpart. A lack of public presence or acknowledgement, and the more limited geographical movement of women, prevented the lesbian world from flourishing in the same manner as the gay male world.<sup>48</sup>

Articles like those about Breedlove and Field served another purpose as well. By identifying “symptoms,” emphasizing possible contagion, and highlighting similar cases, the journalistic narratives functioned like public service announcements encouraging readers to become introspective and determine for themselves whether or not they showed any “signs” of moral degeneracy.

Failing to find similar cases in their medical research, doctors struggled to diagnose Mitchell.<sup>49</sup> Female sexuality, and especially “sexual inversion” among women, had not been studied to the same extent as male (homo)sexuality. Ellis noted that one reason for the lack of information may have been because “for the most part men seem to have been indifferent toward” female sexuality. He speculated that women’s “extreme

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 12, 27.

<sup>49</sup> “Abnormal Love,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, January 31, 1892.

ignorance” of sexual manifestations and eventual understanding of their sexuality may leave them “unwilling to reveal the nature of intimate experiences.”<sup>50</sup> Women did not want to talk about their sex lives. With little information to support their hypotheses, doctors turned to *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*, a French novel, in an attempt to diagnose and treat Mitchell. When initially published, *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* sparked social commotion in France. It critiqued the French education system, and, more important to Mitchell’s case, openly discussed sexuality and lesbianism. Adolphe Belot, the book’s author, and Émile Zola, author of the book’s introduction, did not support the traditional French practice of educating girls in convents because they believed the system perpetuated female homosexuality. Zola supported public education systems, but ultimately preferred homeschooling. In *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*, Belot and Zola did not argue against female education or more public roles for women. Instead, Belot and Zola attempted to protect “traditional” marriage and shield women from lesbianism by exposing readers to the possible consequences of girls attending female boarding-schools.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, homeschooling ensured that women remained within their socially designated sphere.

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<sup>50</sup> Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, II: 121–22. The research conducted for this thesis has yet to determine whether or not doctors utilized the research of P.M. Wise. In 1883, Wise wrote “Case of Sexual Perversion” for the journal *Alienist and Neurologist*. This article described sexual inversion as “a rare form of mental disease” and reported on the case of Lucy Ann Slater. Slater convincingly passed herself as Rev. Joseph Lombard, a married Methodist minister. While the course of Slater’s life differs greatly from Mitchells, their symptoms of “inversion” manifested in similar ways and at similar ages. In some ways, Slater’s case was more extreme. She did not commit a murder, but she did live convincingly as a man for a substantial period of time. Havelock Ellis appears to have agreed with the Belot and Zola but expanded the argument further. He argued that locations of employment which house women together—brothels, convents, prisons, employment boarding houses, etc.—also encouraged the development of homosexuality among women. (See P.M. Wise, “Case of Sexual Perversion,” *Alienist and Neurologist* IV, 1 (January 1883): 87–91 and Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, II: 209–222).

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Rivers, trans., “Introduction,” *Mademoiselle Giraud, Ma Femme* by Adolphe Belot (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), x, xvii–xxiii.

During Mitchell's trial, medical professionals consulted similar books, but declared the fictional Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme as the "only text-book at hand."<sup>52</sup> The similarities between Mitchell and Mlle. Paule Giraud, the subject of the novel, were striking. Giraud had dark hair and eyes.<sup>53</sup> Mitchell had light brown hair and hazel eyes.<sup>54</sup> Both came from middle class families, and both met their sweethearts while attending boarding school.<sup>55</sup> As Belot argued in his book, the all-female population of the private schools allowed for the creation of homosocial relationships that possibly shaped Mitchell's notions of sexuality. Victorian norms point to other reasons why Mitchell was enrolled in private school. Mitchell attended Miss Higbee's School for Young Ladies, known for its high quality and rigorous education. In the United States, private girls' schools admitted only the daughters of rich, white families. Victorian separation did not occur simply along lines of gender. Segregation of race and class determined what schools, professions, and social interactions were appropriate for an individual.<sup>56</sup> Like the fictional Mlle. Giraud, Mitchell's sexual proclivities were likely reinforced—not created—in her private school environment.

Novels, like newspapers, functioned as conduits to share (and create) public opinion, as well as sensationalize current events. Written with a moral façade, literary

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<sup>52</sup> "Abnormal Love."

<sup>53</sup> Adolphe Belot, *Mademoiselle Giraud, My Wife*, trans. A. D., First English Edition (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1891), 100.

<sup>54</sup> "Because She Loved." Articles that described Mitchell's and Ward's appearances tended to be contradictory. "Freda's Lover," printed in *The Cincinnati Post* on January 29, 1892, described Mitchell as blonde with blue eyes and Ward as a brunette with brown eyes, nearly the exact opposite of what was printed in *The Morning Call* on February 24, 1892 and the *Rocky Mountain News* on February 5, 1892

<sup>55</sup> Belot, *Mademoiselle Giraud, My Wife*, 12, 15, 50–51, 66–68; "Because She Loved"; "Alice Mitchell"; Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>56</sup> Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex Violence, and American Modernity*, 9, 35–36, 44 109-110, 142, 182.

works of fiction rationalized the exploitation of human emotion. Novels crossed social spaces. Typically associated with women's reading, novels often functioned as cautionary tales that warned readers of the consequences of rejecting the status quo.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, some religious leaders and medical practitioners believed that novel reading negatively affected women, leading to "madness, or allowed for dangerous pleasure, assertion, or protest," among other seemingly contrary behaviors.<sup>58</sup> And, as seen in Mitchell's case, novels influenced scientific understandings of gender and sexual orientation.<sup>59</sup> By defining homosexuality as a physical and mental issue, health care providers and journalists were able to proceed in a variety of ways.

Several newspaper articles questioned the supposed "rarity" of Mitchell's "unnatural intimacy." For example, on February 12, 1892 the *Santa Fe New Mexican* ran an article that told of a marriage between two women in Wisconsin ten years prior to Mitchell's case. A "man girl," known as Dubois, married Gertie Fuller. They lived together for several years before the nature of their "circumstances became known." As a result, Dubois "was compelled to skip the community in order to avoid a coat of tar and feathers."<sup>60</sup> The term "man girl" was a way to describe and understand Dubois within the context of Victorian society. "Man girl" seemed the most appropriate term since Dubois convincingly "passed" as a man for quite some time before her biological sex became known. Additionally, it reinforced the masculinity of Dubois's character. It is possible that the author of the article did not have the vocabulary to better describe Dubois. Words

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<sup>57</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Expanded (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11, 179–84, 200.

<sup>58</sup> Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4, 42–48.

<sup>59</sup> Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex Violence, and American Modernity*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> "Strange Case of Miss Mitchell," *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, February 12, 1892.

such as “lesbian” and “sapphist,” used to describe female homosexuals, did not come into regular use until around 1890.<sup>61</sup> And, as George Chauncey explains, the gay world developed their own, less technical, colloquialisms to identify and categorize sexual deviants; members of straight society were likely unfamiliar with the “broad lexicon” or “coded” language of the gay world.<sup>62</sup> For example, words that carried implications of masculinity such as “bulldagger” and “bulldyke” were used to describe lesbians.<sup>63</sup> Use of the phrase “man girl” and linking Dubois’s story to Mitchell strengthened the endeavor to masculinize and criminalize female homosexuality. By masculinizing and criminalizing female homosexuality, newspapers reinforced the perceived notion that society “needed” separate spheres in order to prevent social and sexual deviancy.

Dubois’s case was one of several instances of homosexuality and cross dressing that journalists tied to Mitchell. On August 29, 1892, one journalist claimed that Mitchell’s condition was “in reality, quite common” and argued that “dress and education in childhood rather than of any innate tendency” resulted in “such perversions.” Basically, nurture instead of nature led to the creation of sexual manias. Four cases of people “passing” for the other gender were presented as evidence. Sarolta Vay, an Austrian countess, lived a majority of her life as a man, while Omar Kingsley, an internationally known circus performer, was commonly known as “Ella Zoyara.” Anne Chamberlayne Spragg, who lived during the seventeenth century, passed as a man and served as a marine in the Royal British Navy. A more bizarre case was the marriage of

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<sup>61</sup> John Billings, *The National Medical Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers & Co., 1890), 491.

<sup>62</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 14–23.

<sup>63</sup> James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.



Samuel Bundy and Mary Parlour in London. A few days after the wedding Mary returned to the minister and declared her husband was, in fact, a woman.<sup>64</sup>

In childhood, under the direction of their parents and/or caregivers, Vay and Kingsley dressed and lived as their gender opposite. Vay's mother intentionally kept Vay's biological sex a secret, bringing her up a boy, in order to prevent titles and wealth from being inherited by distant male family members. At eight years old, Kingsley's mother apprenticed him to S. Q. Stokes, a circus manager. Inspired by Kingsley's "girl-like beauty," Stokes "transformed" the boy into a girl. Like Vay, Kingsley spent his formative years dressing as, impersonating, and interacting with members of the opposite sex. The article contained less information about Spragg and Bundy. The narrative explained that according to an inscription on a monument in a London churchyard, Spragg had an inclination to be male, began wearing male attire at a young age, and fought in a battle against the French in 1600. Disappointingly, the article did not have any information about Bundy's life prior to marrying Parlour. Of the four cases, only Vay faced accusations of insanity. Medical experts declared her "morally irresponsible" and had her incarcerated in an asylum.<sup>65</sup>

This well-constructed newspaper article contained strong examples of historic same-sex relationships and transvestism. Yet, the author failed in his attempt to draw direct parallels between Mitchell's "perversion of sex" and the offered examples. The nurture instead of nature argument is almost entirely inapplicable to Mitchell. While in her youth she showed interest in "masculine" activities, and she had plans to pose as a

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<sup>64</sup> "Some Perversions of Sex," *The Daily Picayune*, August 29, 1892.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

man in order to marry Ward, there is no evidence to suggest that she actually attempted to publically “pass” as the opposite sex. Furthermore, Mitchell’s parents did not force her into developing a fictitious, masculine gender identity. By identifying cases similar to that of Mitchell’s, journalists added to the discussion of female sexuality by emphasizing Mitchell’s deviation from “normal” gender behaviors. However, one important difference existed between Mitchell and the examples of “similar” cases presented by the press—only Mitchell committed murder.<sup>66</sup>

Mitchell’s case marked a change in how the medical and public spheres viewed homosexual women. Mitchell challenged medical and social stereotypes of “inverted” females. Historically, physicians “presented the homosexual woman as an extreme transvestite,” a description more suited for Dubois than Mitchell.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Dubois, descriptions of Mitchell’s physical appearance in newspaper articles maintained a sense of femininity. In opposition to popular belief of the time, lesbians could not be identified simply by their choice in wardrobe. For example, not all female homosexuals adopted “male attire” despite its practicability.<sup>68</sup> In regard to outward appearance, Mitchell looked like any other white middle-class woman. So, by the end of the nineteenth-century, instead of diagnosing elevated masculinity in certain women strictly based on outward appearance, doctors “proved” the presence of masculinity in women by analyzing present

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<sup>66</sup> The only exception to this was in the case of Emma Williams and Eleanora Richardson. As previously noted, Williams killed Richardson after Richardson attempted to dissolve their relationship. However, the article “Some Perversions of Sex” did not reference the Williams-Richardson case.

<sup>67</sup> Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 39. As will be discussed in chapter three, phrenology and physiognomy were popular ways to diagnose disease. These “sciences” used measurements of the head and face in relation to the rest of the body to “read character” and determine a persons’ propensity for certain kinds of behaviors. Thus, outward and physical appearance remained an important component in diagnosing mental illness. However, by the end of the nineteenth-century, doctors examined medical histories and relied on more than appearance to diagnose mental conditions

<sup>68</sup> Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, II:141.

and past behaviors.

Journalists and scientists used different language to describe male and female criminals who suffered from mental illnesses. For example, on February 25, 1892, *The Day* printed articles about both Mitchell and Edward M. Field. The article referencing Mitchell, “Alice Kissed the Blood,” recounted the murderous events of January 25, 1892 while “His Legacy of Insanity” told Field’s story. “Hereditary insanity” apparently plagued Field’s family for generations. “Totally incompetent,” he could not “plead to the six separate charges found against him.” Unfortunately, the article did not list his specific crimes but it did describe Field as, “a young scion of a noble family with a series of misdeeds of which he was guiltless.” Descriptions of his illness and its manifestations filled the article and told a tale of his family’s endurance noting their successes despite a history of chronic illness. At one point the article quoted a man who stated, “Great wit and madness are close allied, and their partitions do their bounds divide.” The narrative clarified this comment by describing Field as a “great man” despite his family’s struggle with the “affliction.”<sup>69</sup> Here the reader is conditioned to pity Field rather than judge him. In this instance, Field’s insanity both rationalized and justified his deviation from socially-accepted, and expected, gender behaviors.

Accusatory in tone, and filled with gruesome details, the article about Mitchell focused on her violent and unusual behavior at the time of the murder. The dramatic

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<sup>69</sup> “His Legacy of Insanity,” *The Day*, February 25, 1892; “Alice Kissed the Blood,” *The Day*, February 25, 1892. Upon further research, Field’s crimes surfaced. He was accused of theft and indicted on a charge of grand larceny. As mentioned in “His Legacy of Insanity,” an investigation into his sanity was brought for to determine the extent of his mental-competency. A lack of mental-competency would relieve him from standing trial for his crimes, yet possibly subject him to incarceration within a mental asylum. See “Edward M. Field Indicted,” *The Washington Bee*, January 2, 1892 and “Edward M. Field’s Sanity,” *The Salt Lake Times*, February 23, 1892.

narrative summarized the trial testimonies of witnesses Lillie Johnson and J. J. Williams. Johnson explained in her testimony that after Mitchell slit Ward's throat and returned to Johnson's buggy, Mitchell, realizing she was covered in Ward's blood, kissed her stained hands and proclaimed, "It is Freda's blood and I love it!" Repeating trial testimony that included such declarations validated for readers Mitchell's claim of insanity. The statement, "She loved Freda and Freda loved her," reminded readers of the perceived unconventional nature of Mitchell's relationship with the victim.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Field, Mitchell's deviation from established gender based social conventions provided an explanation for her unusual behavior, verified her insanity, and rationalized the lack of public sympathy.

Headlines and phrases like "Misfit Affection," "A Pair of Lunatics," and "Unnatural Love" defined Mitchell, explained her crime, and implied that it was unsuitable for such a person to interact with mainstream society.<sup>71</sup> Such people were often set apart from their respective communities. Thus, newspapers reinforced the concept that there existed a perceived "need" for separate spheres.

Society viewed Mitchell as a violent criminal who should be punished through incarceration. As a lesbian, society perceived Mitchell's sexuality as a crime against nature and a symptom of mental illness and dangerous because her sexuality challenged the gender-based social system prevalent in late-nineteenth-century America. Through the lens of American-Victorianism, arguably, committing murder was the lesser of the two "crimes." Deemed "insane," Mitchell was all but guaranteed to experience some

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<sup>70</sup> "Alice Kissed the Blood."

<sup>71</sup> "Misfit Affection"; "A Pair of Lunatics"; "The Girls Wanted to Marry," *The Sun*, February 1, 1892.

form of confinement. Due to her diagnosis of insanity, Mitchell avoided a prison sentence, possibly even the death penalty, and ensured her a life-sentence detained within the walls of an asylum.

Medical practitioners in the late-nineteenth-century defined mental illness as a crime against society, which in turn, justified the action of removing from the public sphere those perceived of or diagnosed as insane.<sup>72</sup> The actions of newspaper journalists and editors further marginalized and alienated the mentally ill. Within the context of American-Victorian society, the only “rational” way to ensure the separation of competent/incompetent spheres was through the incarceration of mentally ill individuals. As manifested in newspaper coverage about Alice Mitchell, late-nineteenth-century media explained notions of separate spheres using new scientific and medical “knowledge” about mental illness and sexuality.

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<sup>72</sup> Porter, *A Social History of Madness: The World through the Eyes of the Insane*, 16.

## CHAPTER III

“MURDER MANIA,” SENSATIONAL STORIES, AND PRINT MEDIA: EARLY  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVES

Scholars have addressed the history of journalism in a number of ways. They have scrutinized ideas of objectivity, the impact of industrialization, and sensationalism in print media. Yet, journalistic narratives exist outside literary genres traditionally studied or analyzed by historians. As professional storytellers, journalists used artistic and literary devices, along with social and cultural symbols, to construct their narratives. Not yet a professional requirement, objectivity was of little concern, giving journalists the freedom to enhance their reports. Reports about murderous women filled with detailed descriptions augmented with dramatic imagery (visual narrative) heightened the entertainment value of newspapers and perpetuated ideas of the mentally ill as unsafe and unfit to live freely among the general population. When analyzing the operation of storytelling, newspaper articles written about women like nurse Jane Toppan create grand narratives that reveal turn of the twentieth century perceptions of crime, gender, and mental health.

On October 30, 1901, several east coast newspapers informed the reading public of the arrest of “Mrs. Jane Toppan, suspected of having murdered Mrs. Mary Gibbs.”<sup>73</sup> The short accounts noted that the victim might have been poisoned, but offered few details.<sup>74</sup> In fact, it was not until November 2 when officials determined a motive for

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<sup>73</sup> “Mrs. Jane Toppan Arrested,” *The Evening Star*, October 30, 1901.

<sup>74</sup> “A Serious Charge,” *The Evening Tribune*, October 30, 1901; “Suspected Murderess Captured,” *Watertown Daily Times*, October 30, 1901.

murder that Toppan's actions proved worthy of mass media attention.<sup>75</sup> As it turned out, Toppan killed many of her patients. The *modus operandi*? Poison. With a desire “to be known as the greatest criminal that ever lived,” Toppan's behavior—arguing with physicians, hallucinating, and attempting suicide—prolonged her media coverage.<sup>76</sup> Stories and illustrations inspired by the nurse with “murder mania” propelled Toppan to legendary status.<sup>77</sup>

Toppan's crimes occurred in a completely different manner than Alice Mitchell's, but like Mitchell, doctors believed Toppan suffered from a type of “moral insanity.” Methodical, systematic, and quiet, Toppan's murders seemingly lacked the same passion as Mitchell's crime. Perceived as intimate and passive when compared to a slashing, Toppan's preferred method of murder (poisoning) still fell under the umbrella of violent crimes.

To Victorians violence represented a lack of self-restraint and a regression to baser human instincts.<sup>78</sup> Accepted understandings of gender dictated that such characteristics were more pronounced in men than women, thus they considered violent behavior as a feature of masculinity.<sup>79</sup> Newspapers and novels filled with images and/or descriptions of violence, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, entertained readers and worked as cautionary tales that emphasized Victorian values and virtues.<sup>80</sup> Sensationalized violence,

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<sup>75</sup> “Alleged Woman Poisoner Is Accused of 11 Murders,” *The Evening World*, November 2, 1901.

<sup>76</sup> “Poison Her Passion,” *The Palo Alto Reporter*, July 24, 1902.

<sup>77</sup> “Has Murder Mania,” *The Saint Paul Globe*, July 6, 1902.

<sup>78</sup> Howe, “American Victorianism as Culture.”

<sup>79</sup> Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 197–216.

<sup>80</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York: Modern Library, 1897); Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1886).

crime, and controversy enhanced the entertainment value of print media by overemphasizing minutiae and exaggerating details. Furthermore, the coupling of violence with stereotypes both challenged and reinforced established notions of gender and sexuality, masculinized crime, and shaped understandings of social spheres.

Illustrations and photographs in print journalism were not new when newspapers published articles about Toppan. Broadsides, newspapers, and other forms of print media had long included illustrations and sensational stories.<sup>81</sup> However, due to a combination of factors, such as “lower costs of newsprint” and the invention of color lithography, shifts took place in news reporting practices and production which resulted in the increased publication of sensational stories and images.<sup>82</sup> One such factor included editorial emphasis on good story telling and “getting the facts.”<sup>83</sup> Objectivity in journalism, as would be expected today, did not exist. “Hard” news contained “important” material while “soft” news was filled with “trivial” information.<sup>84</sup> Articles followed two models of reporting—“information” or “story.”<sup>85</sup> Journalists “sought as often to write ‘literature’ as to gather news.”<sup>86</sup> Literary journalism, or “faction,” emerged

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<sup>81</sup> Gregory A. Borchard, Stephen Bates, and Lawrence J. Mullen, “Publishing Violence as News and Art,” in *Sensationalism: Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19th-Century Reporting*, ed. David B. Sachsman and David W. Bulla (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 2013), 53–56.

<sup>82</sup> W. Joseph Campbell, *The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xix–xxi, 1–11.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 4–7, 89.

<sup>84</sup> Dustin Harp, *Desperately Seeking Women Readers: U.S. Newspapers and the Construction of a Female Readership* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 1–3.

<sup>85</sup> Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, 4–7, 89. Michael Schudson’s “information” model is focused on fact based, “objective” journalism. The “story” model emphasizes the use of facts to entertain readers. Newspapers at the turn of the twentieth-century tended to support one model or another, but all had elements of both.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



as a blended genre.<sup>87</sup> Many popular news stories involving murder followed the “story” model and were still considered “hard” news.

Historical popular news stories shared four common characteristics: a “fight or contest;” clearly defined protagonists; antagonists with “well-identified personalities” slowly developed in the stories allowing “the press to familiarize” the readers with the individual characters; and, last, an element of mystery and/or suspense, if not both.<sup>88</sup> Mystery, an editorial ingredient, exploited readers’ interests in crime, murder, and death. In many situations the *who* was already determined, and in asking *why* people engaged in an “ongoing effort to understand and explain the nature of our common humanity.”<sup>89</sup>

Journalists used a variety of tools, including word choice and descriptive language to stimulate sensationalism, embellish stories, and encourage various forms of societal segregation. “Description” situated action, informed readers of the nature and personalities of individual characters, and instigated emotional responses in readers.<sup>90</sup> For example, journalists used derogatory adjectives such as “degenerate,” “deranged,” “eccentric,” and “fiendish” to describe Toppan.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, journalists compared Toppan to other well-known and historical murderers including Jack the Ripper, Lucretia

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<sup>87</sup> John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 1. Hartsock uses the word “faction” to explain literary journalism—a hybrid word to explain a hybrid concept. According to Hartsock, literary journalism exists somewhere between “fact” and “fiction.” It is a journalistic piece that “reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to phenomenal experience.”

<sup>88</sup> Brazil, “Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America,” 166.

<sup>89</sup> Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 1–4, 93.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 45.

<sup>91</sup> “Jane Toppan’s Crimes,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, June 25, 1902; “Crime Which Makes Fiction Tame,” *Akron Daily Democrat*, June 24, 1902; “Miss Toppan Killed Thirty-One,” *Evening Times Republican*, June 24, 1902; “Poisoned 31 People,” *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, July 6, 1902, 31.

Borgia, and Catherine de Medici among others.<sup>92</sup> Associating historical murderers with a professional nurse potentially invoked conflicted emotional responses in readers and aided in stigmatizing mental illness.

In a recent study, communication specialists Jessie M. Quintero Johnson and Bonnie Miller analyzed depictions of mentally ill murderous women found in three forms of current popular media: news sources, an individual movie, and soap operas. Johnson and Miller identified an intriguing pattern in soap opera depictions of violent mentally ill females: “romantic rejection leads to psychosis” which then “triggers” violent behavior.<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, this pattern can function as a formulaic device to deconstruct historical narratives about murderous women.

Rejection stippled Toppan’s life. Born Honora Kelly, Toppan was the daughter of Irish immigrants. Sadly, when she was a small child, Toppan’s mother passed away.<sup>94</sup> Due to his inability to care for his children and his own supposed mental health issues, Toppan’s father (known as “Kelly the Crack”) placed his daughters in a children’s asylum.<sup>95</sup> Taken in by separate families, the Kelly children were split apart. Newspapers stated that the Toppans adopted young Honora Kelly and changed her name to Jane

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<sup>92</sup> “Poison Her Passion,” *Western Kansas World*, August 2, 1902; “Poisoned 31 People,” 31; “How Women Do Murder,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, March 8, 1903. In “Poison Her Passion,” journalists compared Toppan to Lucretia Borgia, “Holmes,” Garcia Palasco; Valdivrez Massinni, and Maria Polloch. *The Wichita Daily Eagle* noted that *The New York World* originally printed “Posioned 31 People.” This article compared Toppan to “Jack the Ripper,” Lucretia Borgia, “Catherine de Medica,” and the Marquise de Brinvilliers. The exact same article ran in several newspapers throughout the country, sometimes under different names. For example, on July 6, 1902, *The St. Paul Globe* printed “Has Murder Mania.” The body of the text is identical to “Poisoned 31 People,” but unlike *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, *The St. Paul Globe* did not credit *The New York World* with originally publishing the article.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson and Miller, “When Women ‘Snap’: The Use of Mental Illness to Contextualize Women’s Acts of Violence in Contemporary Popular Media,” 211–17.

<sup>94</sup> “Has Murder Mania.”

<sup>95</sup> “Insanity the Family’s Blight,” *The Daily Northwestern*, December 7, 1901.

Toppan.<sup>96</sup> While they did change her name, the Toppans never legally adopted the child. Instead, she was, for lack of a better term, *indentured* to the Toppans, free to leave at the age of eighteen. Should there have been any complications in her behavior or upbringing, the Toppans had the right to return her to the children's asylum. The Toppans never truly recognized the girl as a family member and subjected her to passive emotional abuse. The Toppans told her "that she could not help being Irish, but that she need not be a 'paddy'" and informed people in their community that she was the orphan of Italian immigrants.<sup>97</sup> While her name change can be considered a marker of acceptance by her new family, it also represents a rejection of her past, forced upon her by her new guardians. The name "Honora Kelly" revealed Toppan's Irish heritage. Irish people in the United States experienced extreme prejudice, racism, and social segregation. Possibly due to their own prejudices, and/or to avoid social stigma and ostracization, the Toppans imposed the identity of "Jane Toppan" upon young Honora Kelly. Subject to the will of her new guardians, Toppan had no choice but to conceal her past and cultural heritage. In early adulthood, Toppan became engaged, but for unknown reasons the marriage never took place.<sup>98</sup> Due to a lack of information pertaining to this relationship, "romantic rejection" cannot currently be considered a factor in Toppan's psychopathy. In soap operas, "romance" is a dramatic element used for story progression and character development. Yet, it is not the cause of psychopathy. Rather, it is the act of rejection that can affect a person's mental state, potentially causing changes in behavior. Abandoned by her father,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.; "Has Murder Mania."

<sup>97</sup> Charles Follen Folsom, *Studies of Criminal Responsibility and Limited Responsibility* (Privately Printed, 1909), 136–40.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 139.

taken in by an unwelcoming family, and forced to change her name and hide her Irish background, Toppan arguably experienced enough rejection to warrant a change in her mental state and behavior.

The “rejection formula” functions by humanizing the criminal. Compelled by revealing narratives and filled with sympathetic feelings for the offender, audiences rationalize the deviant behaviors of the antagonist. Placing a criminal within the framework of a victim shifts responsibility for violent crime from the “rejectee” (Toppan) to the “rejecter” (Toppan’s father or adoptive parents). This formula is also evident in stories about Mitchell. Ward rejected Mitchell’s affection and marriage proposal. Unlike Toppan, “romance” played a crucial role in rejection narratives about Mitchell. Within this framework, journalists depicted Mitchell and Toppan as victims of circumstance and defined their behaviors as reactionary rather than predatory, providing justification for their placement within asylums instead of prisons. Journalistic narratives written in this manner legitimized the misconduct of criminals and contributed to stigmas associated with mental illness.

Photographs and illustrations provided newspaper reports with visual support, and reinforced concepts, opinions, and ideas shared within the narratives.<sup>99</sup> Illustrations and photographs often appeared in “yellow” newspapers. Also known at the time as “new journalism,” yellow journalism relied on sensational stories and images in order to increase newspaper circulation and business profits.<sup>100</sup> The popularity of print journalism surged in 1884 when “Mr. Pulitzer’s rejuvenated World [sic] burst upon an astonished

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<sup>99</sup> Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, 31–32.

<sup>100</sup> Borchard, Bates, and Mullen, “Publishing Violence as News and Art,” 53–57.

public as a veritable picture paper.” Up until that point *The New York World’s* popularity as a newspaper had been waning. According to Allan Forman, “at that time it was Mr. Pulitzer’s design to use the pictures as a ‘sensation’ to attract public attention, and then to quietly weed them out until The World [sic] should be brought back to the terra firma of newspaper dignity.” Pulitzer’s plan failed. As pictures were eliminated from the paper, circulation dropped. This drop in circulation was initially attributed to Pulitzer’s absence. He left for Europe just as the elimination process began. However, with such a dip in circulation, Pulitzer’s employees chose to re-incorporate pictures and illustrations. Their choice proved profitable as “circulation shot up again in an almost straight line.” Other newspapers soon followed suit.<sup>101</sup> Arguably the most prominent of yellow journals, and the most prolific in publishing visual narratives, included *The New York World*, *The New York Sun*, *The New York Journal*, and *The New York Tribune*.

Some newspapers rejected the use of sensational tactics and images all together. For example, in September 1900, *The Indianapolis Journal* refused “to put itself on a level with the cheap sensational sheets that are flooding the country, and it therefore appeals only to that class of the reading public which wants the news presented in a decent and dignified manner.” The comment continued, “The picture craze has taken possession of most of the papers. The Journal [sic] will have none of it. The space that poor illustrations occupy can much better be filled with reading matter.”<sup>102</sup> Like most papers, *The Indianapolis Journal* sought a particular type of audience and readership. Certain forms of visual entertainment, such as nickelodeons and vaudeville houses, and

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<sup>101</sup> Allan Forman, “Art and Artists,” *The Quarterly Illustrator* 1, no. 2 (December 1893): 315.

<sup>102</sup> “A Few Facts Regarding The Journal,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, September 16, 1900.

by extension illustrative newspapers, were believed to appeal primarily to “working class and immigrant audiences.”<sup>103</sup> By declaring that it only appealed to those who wanted “the news presented in a decent and dignified manner,” *The Indianapolis Journal* implied that it sought more educated, middle-class readers.<sup>104</sup> Curiously, the comment was part of a column advertising a price reduction in the cost of the newspaper, making it more affordable to a wider audience.

“Dignified” papers did not use or support the use of pictures within the folds of their newspapers for a number of reasons, such as costs associated with printing and the use of telegraph lines to receive and transmit stories. Associations made between printed images and violence, scandal, and sensationalism gave cause for some editors to disapprove of the use of illustrations and photographs. Others felt that pictures poorly depicted current events or believed that pictures in newspapers encouraged the regression of readers’ levels of maturity.<sup>105</sup> Newspapers such as *The Indianapolis Journal*, *The New York Press*, among others, chose not to adopt the practices of “new journalism” and published more “objective” articles with few or no pictures, but non-yellow publications contributed to yellow journalism by printing articles about current events sensationalized in other newspapers.<sup>106</sup>

#### Controversial by nature, murderous women and violent mentally ill individuals

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<sup>103</sup> Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6; see also “Journalistic Indecency,” *The New York Press*, December 11, 1896.

<sup>104</sup> “A Few Facts Regarding The Journal.”

<sup>105</sup> Campbell, *The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms*, 24; Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, 7; Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women’s Business*, 1–2. Initially, early American newspaper editors intended for their papers to be read by “literate citizens.” This translated to white male, usually middle class, members of society.

<sup>106</sup> “A Few Facts Regarding The Journal”; “Journalistic Indecency.”

were easily sensationalized. As such, Toppan's lethal actions proved worthy of mass media attention and international coverage.<sup>107</sup> In June 1902, Toppan willingly confessed to the murders of thirty-one people, naming each of her victims. Her physicians *told* her she was insane, an accusation she denied.<sup>108</sup> But by July 1902, only one month later, newspapers reported Toppan as "safely confined" at Taunton Asylum. From Toppan's arrest through her incarceration, journalists had everything they needed to write provocative stories and sell more newspapers.<sup>109</sup> Journalists, like their literary counterparts, recognized "a reading public hungry for Gothic horror."<sup>110</sup> The more obscure and grotesque stories grabbed attention, aroused emotion, raised public awareness to important social issues, and entertained readers. For example, in 1872 Charles Seymour, a journalist from La Crosse, Wisconsin stated that newspaper readers threatened to stop their newspaper subscriptions unless the news was filled with stories of "earthquakes, tornadoes, conflagrations, long-tailed comets, falling meteors, explosions, shipwrecks, collisions" and so forth.<sup>111</sup> Authors and journalists knew what elements made entertaining stories and incorporated them into their publications. At that time, both literary fiction and news illustrated aberrant women as fallen angels or monsters, such as

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<sup>107</sup> "Is a Boston Borgia," *The Hawaiian Star*, July 7, 1902; "Shocking Murders. Crimes by Women," *The Ballarat Star*, January 3, 1902; "Shocking Murders. Crimes by Women. 12 Poisoned," *Evening News*, January 3, 1902; "A Murderous Mad Nurse," *The Age*, June 28, 1902; "An American Lucretia Borgia," *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, June 27, 1902; "A Nurse Poisoner," *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, June 28, 1902; "A Wholesale Poisoner," *Northants Evening Telegraph*, July 5, 1902; "Are Women More Bloodthirsty Than Men?," *The Dauphin Herald*, August 20, 1908.

<sup>108</sup> "Strange Murder Mania of Jane Toppan Twentieth Century Lucretia Borgia," *The St. Louis Republic*, June 29, 1902; "Jane Toppan's Victims Were 31," *The Boston Daily Globe*, June 25, 1902; "Strange Murder Mania of Jane Toppan Twentieth Century Lucretia Borgia"; "Wholesale Murder," *Daily Kennebec Journal*, June 25, 1902.

<sup>109</sup> "Poison Her Passion," July 24, 1902; "Has Murder Mania"; "Poisoned 31 People," 31.

<sup>110</sup> Gordon Morris Bakken and Brenda Farrington, *Women Who Kill Men: California Courts, Gender, and the Press* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>111</sup> As quoted by Donald L. Shaw in "News Bias and the Telegraph: A Study of Historical Change," *Journalism Quarterly*, Spring 1967, 3-12, 31.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" or George MacDonald's "Lilith."<sup>112</sup>

Historically, women who defy social conventions have been regarded as rebellious, deviant, hysterical, and at times, evil. In literature, witches, old hags, wicked queens, evil stepmothers, and ugly stepsisters have often represented the antithesis of virtuous and pious young women. The nefarious actions of antagonist women have often included the murder (or attempted murder) of a spouse, child, or enemy. Journalistic narratives about, and illustrations that depicted, Toppan and her crimes included and perpetuated such historic and literary motifs. As early as 1904, several newspaper journalists used visual imagery to tell Toppan's story. The visual narratives she inspired captured attention, used stereotypes and symbols to visually retell her story, appealed to the illiterate and non-English speaking public, and reinforced the perceived "need" for separate spheres.

A 2009 study analyzing how criminal women are portrayed in current popular media found that the media separated female criminals into groups of either "'bad'" or 'mad/sad' women." The media depicted "bad" women as those who defied traditional gender norms, making them "deliberately responsible for their actions." "Mad/sad" women were often depicted as "victims of circumstance" and considered "not fully responsible for their actions." The findings of this study can be applied to historical news sources. Several newspapers used dramatic language and imagery to narrate Toppan's story. Furthermore, the categorical delineation of "bad" and "mad/sad" is evident in both

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<sup>112</sup> "Has Murder Mania"; Bakken and Farrington, *Women Who Kill Men: California Courts, Gender, and the Press*, 11; Brazil, "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America," 166; Lane, *Murder in America: A History*, 1-4, 93; Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women's Business*, 20-31.



printed articles and illustrations about Toppan.<sup>113</sup>

On October 23, 1904, *The Boston Post* printed a very large and detailed illustration depicting Toppan's struggle with hallucinations after her incarceration (figure 2-1). Three separate images displayed Toppan's decline in health. The portraits revealed a woman who was once healthy, then somewhat gaunt (and sitting behind bars), then as

**Figure 2-1**



“Jane Toppan, Slowly Dying, is the Victim of the Phantasies of her Murderous Work,” *The Boston Sunday Post*, October 23, 1904

<sup>113</sup> Brennan and Vandenberg, “Depictions of Female Offenders in Front-Page Newspaper Stories: The Importance of Race/Ethnicity,” 145. Brennan and Vandenberg reviewed newspaper articles about female offenders from two U.S. newspapers that were published in 2006. While their work is focused on the practices of modern popular media, their observations and analysis on the use of stereotypes works an acceptable model for analyzing early-twentieth-century newspaper reports about murderous women.

thin and malnourished. A small bottle of poison was positioned directly above the start of the narrative. Taunton Asylum filled the background, legitimizing the story.<sup>114</sup> The illustrations presented Toppan as seemingly “normal,” “bad,” and “mad,” each image conveying specific messages.

An image of Toppan in the upper left corner of the illustration humanized the

**Figure 2-2**



- No. 1. CHARLEMAGNE, though unable to write his own name, promoted schools, arts, civilization, and was the most powerful and enterprising monarch of his day.
- No. 2. JAMES BOSWELL, the celebrated biographer of Dr. Samuel Johnson. He resembled Johnson as a fly does an elephant, while his self-assurance and impudence have rarely been equalled.
- No. 3. CINGHALESE, a gentleman from the mountains of Ceylon.
- No. 4. JOHN LOCKE, a distinguished philosopher.
- No. 5. TASMANIAN, an aboriginee of Tasmania. His head does not, while his face does, manifest his cruel and cannibal habits.
- No. 6. LORD BYRON, a poet of marvellous genius.
- No. 7. CASSIUS, a famous Roman general, described in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."
- No. 8. REV. ROWLAND HILL, an English clergyman.
- No. 9. LAVATER, an eloquent Swiss preacher, poet, and physiognomist.
- No. 10. PAUL I., Emperor of Russia, as his feeble face indicates, he was one of the weakest rulers in Europe.

Joseph Simms, *Physiognomy Illustrated; or, Nature's Revelations of Character* (New York: Murray Hill Publishing Company, 1887), an unnumbered page alongside the title page.

murderous nurse. The simple act of including a picture of Toppan depicted as “normal” had the potential to instigate moral panic. The small portrait defined insanity as an invisible condition suggesting that *anyone* could become a moral degenerate or suffer from mental maladies, and therefore, be capable of serial murder. At the time, a popular line of psychological thought presumed that physical traits could predict or determine a

person's mental and/or moral characteristics (figure 2-2). Essentially, a person's mental state and behaviors could be determined by the size and ratio of certain parts of the

<sup>114</sup> “Jane Toppan, Slowly Dying, Is the Victim of the Phantasies of Her Murderous Work,” *The Boston Sunday Post*, October 23, 1904. Fred Kulz illustrated the image printed in *The Boston Sunday Post*. Kulz was a renowned illustrator in the United States at the of Toppan's criminal trials.

body.<sup>115</sup> The inclusion of an image of a “normal” Toppan went against this line of popular thought. Lacking any outward indications of physical or mental instability, the image provided readers with a baseline

**Figure 2-2** represents one example of how nineteenth-century physiognomists relied on physical characteristics to determine the nature of an individual’s character. Note example “No. 5;” identified as “Tasmanian, an aboriginee of Tasmania,” he is set apart from the other examples in both the written description and in portrayal of his physical appearance. While each of the caricatures possesses exaggerated appearances, all but “Tasmanian” is identified by name and represents various “white” European cultures and ethnicities. Placed in the center of the image, “Tasmanian” represents the benchmark for which the other men are to be measured, physically and “morally.” Even in the written descriptions, the traits of the perceived “weakest” white man on the list, Paul I, cannot compare to “Tasmanian.” According to the author of this list, in reference to “Tasmanian,” “His head does not, while his face does, manifest his cruel and cannibal habits.”

for “normality” and reminded readers that Toppan was once a regular and trusted member of society.

The picture of Toppan behind bars reminded readers of Toppan’s criminal status, which categorized her as “bad.”<sup>116</sup> She challenged gender norms by committing murder and undermining the credibility of professional nurses. Due to its association with femininity and women’s perceived “natural instinct” to nurture, nursing was considered an acceptable form of employment for single working women at the time of Toppan’s conviction.<sup>117</sup> And, as discussed in the previous chapter, inclinations for crime and violence were considered masculine traits. The figurative placement of Toppan within a jail cell reinforced the notion of Toppan as “bad” by insinuating “deliberate” responsibility for her actions, thus making her deserving of punishment through imprisonment.<sup>118</sup> Prison confinement offered a means to protect the public from criminals

<sup>115</sup> See Lombroso Caesar and William Ferrero, *The Female Offender* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895). The authors of this book relied on the practices of phrenology and physiognomy to compare, rank, and set apart “normal” women from criminal, “lunatic,” and prostitute women.

<sup>116</sup> “Jane Toppan, Slowly Dying, Is the Victim of the Phantasies of Her Murderous Work.”

<sup>117</sup> Maria Markell Morantz Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1–5.

<sup>118</sup> Caesar and Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, 22, 27–28.

like Toppan.

Wandering aimlessly, haunted by hallucinations of her victims, “mad” Toppan occupied the center of the image. The shadow of a nurse, superimposed upon the insane Toppan, appeared to hold a cup in front of the mad woman’s mouth, as if enticing Toppan to partake of a deadly substance.<sup>119</sup> The picture insinuated that due to mental illness, Toppan was not “fully responsible” for her actions. Therefore, she should not be punished, at least not in the same manner as sane criminals. Incarceration in a mental institution, rather than imprisonment, would protect Toppan from herself.

Two possible reasons exist as to why both “types” of women are represented in one illustration. First, unsure of where to place her, the illustrator chose to depict Toppan as both “bad” and “mad.” Second, representation of both categories of women in one illustration suggests that the public was being offered a choice as to how the criminally insane should be received publically and in what way they should be incarcerated. Both murder and mental illness were considered crimes against society. Diagnosis of a person’s moral and/or mental condition determined the form of confinement: prisons for criminals (“bad”), asylums for the insane (“mad/sad”). Whether “bad” or “mad,” the illustration implies that both “types” of women committed transgressions and should receive “punishment” by being removed from mainstream society.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, representation of Toppan’s decline in physical and mental health reflected society’s “fear of the Other [sic]” and “desire to visualize ‘madness.’”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> “Jane Toppan, Slowly Dying, Is the Victim of the Phantasies of Her Murderous Work.”

<sup>120</sup> Foucault, *History of Madness*, 503.

<sup>121</sup> Jennifer Eisenhauer, “A Visual Culture of Stigma: Critically Examining Representations of Mental Illness,” *Art Education* 61, no. 5 (2008): 15.

Less ambiguous than the illustration, the printed narrative that accompanied the image in *The Boston Post* condemned Toppan in a more direct manner. Credited as the opinion of the doctors and nurses who cared for Toppan, the first line read, “’Twould be better that Jane Toppan was dead.” The narrative indicated that death would save Toppan from the suffering associated with mental illness. Furthermore, the author asserted that “If Jane Toppan would only die the officials at Taunton would feel relieved” from having “to contend” with the murderess. Despite the supposed opinions of her caretakers, Toppan’s doctors strived to keep Toppan alive, even preventing her from committing “suicide by starvation.” According to the article, because Toppan feared that her caretakers were poisoning her food, she refused to eat.<sup>122</sup> In this instance, “bad” and “mad” overlap. By starving herself, Toppan openly defied the counsel of her doctors. While not a criminal offense, her actions challenged the socially-constructed expectations of her gender. American society expected women of Toppan’s generation to develop the particular characteristics of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”<sup>123</sup> Toppan refused to submit to the authority of medical experts. Thus, she rejected what society considered an integral component of the female identity. Regardless of any sympathy garnered for Toppan due to her mental state, her contrary behavior within the asylum gave the author of the article permission to designate her as the antagonist within the narrative. However, in a somewhat ironic twist, Toppan refused to eat due to an *irrational fear of poisoning*. She feared dying in the same manner as her victims. Doctors attributed her overly anxious behavior to mental illness. Thus, Toppan was “bad” *because*

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<sup>122</sup> “Jane Toppan, Slowly Dying, Is the Victim of the Phantasies of Her Murderous Work.”

<sup>123</sup> Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 152.

she was “mad.”

Two years later, almost to the day, *The Washington Times* published a large illustration and article describing Toppan’s suicide attempt (figure 2-3). A dark cemetery filled the background of the illustration. Positioned in the center the image was a small glass of poison emanating a ghostly vapor. Similar to the illustration in *The Boston Post*, *The Washington Times* portrayed three images of Toppan at different points in her life. Photographs taken of

**Figure 2-3**



“The Modern Lucretia Borgia Haunted by the Phantoms of Her Victims is Facing Death,” *The Washington Times*, October 21, 1906.

Toppan at Taunton asylum provided the illustrator with inspiration for his simple caricatures.<sup>124</sup> The image of Toppan in the upper right side of the illustration provided readers with an example of how Toppan appeared when committed to the asylum at Taunton. The smaller image on the lower left side portrayed Toppan’s weight loss due to her self-inflicted starvation. The most prominent image, in both size and impact, portrayed a frightened and scared nurse, drawn in mid-turn, moving to face her accuser as

<sup>124</sup> Henry R. Stedman, “A Case of Moral Insanity with Repeated Homicides and Incendiarism and Late Development of Delusions,” *American Journal of Insanity* 61, no. 2 (1904): plate XXVI between pages 275–97.

if caught in the murderous act. The nurse's gaze and physical stance gave the illustration an interactive element by positioning the reader as a proxy witness to the crime or as the nurse's next potential victim.<sup>125</sup>

Although three images of Toppan appeared in *The Washington Times* illustration, the picture portrayed “bad” and “mad” Toppan in one character and heavily emphasized her former position as a nurse. Such a representation potentially evoked conflicting emotional reactions in readers. American society trusted the professional medical establishment. As a “healthcare killer,” Toppan undermined the nursing profession by breaking the “almost sacred relationship of the nurse and patient.”<sup>126</sup> In truth, however, Toppan was not a nurse: she never finished her training. But as demonstrated in the illustration, the media spread half-truths about Toppan instigating the medical community, and the public alike, to question the professional status of nurses.<sup>127</sup>

When compared, the narrative in *The Washington Times* echoes the themes and messages found in *The Boston Post*, as if *The Washington Times* simply rewrote and republished the first article. Additionally, the article printed in *The Washington Times* does not allude to any previous suicide attempts by Toppan, making it sound as if a new

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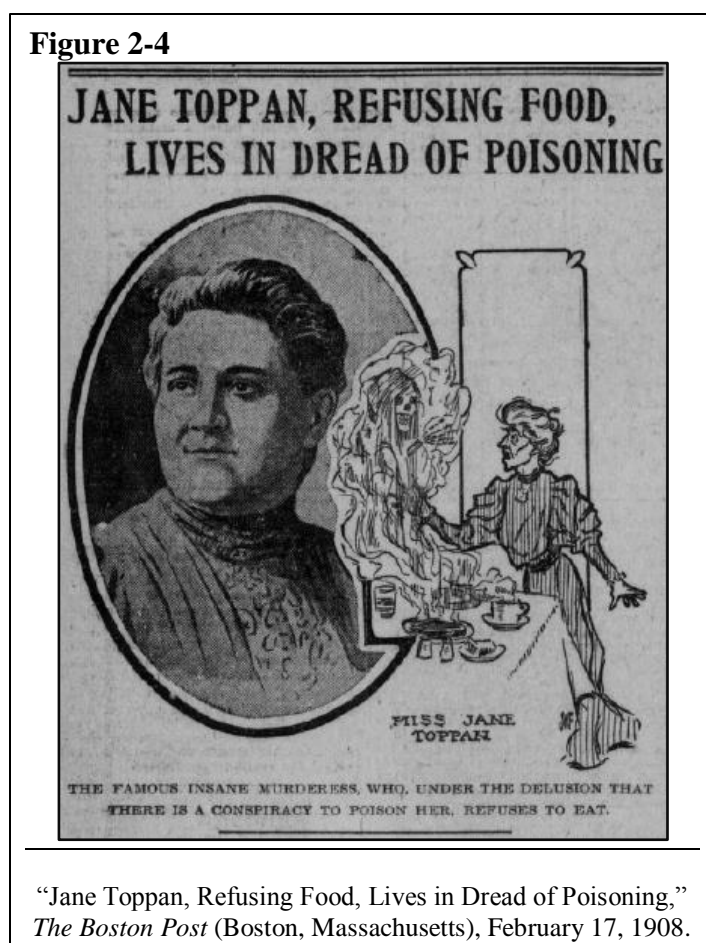
<sup>125</sup> “The Modern Lucretia Borgia Haunted by the Phantoms of Her Victims Is Facing Death,” *The Washington Times*, October 21, 1906.

<sup>126</sup> Eric Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*, 6th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), 211; “Poisoned 31 People.”

<sup>127</sup> “The Case of Jane Toppan,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 2, no. 11 (August 1902): 974–78; “The A, B, C of State Registration,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 3, no. 2 (November 1902): 156–60.. Criminal psychologist Eric Hickey defined this type of murderer as “the quiet killer” and defined the behavior of such killers as professional, but they silently take the lives of unsuspecting patients as opportunities arise. While Dr. Hickey’s analysis primarily pertains to serial killers in the latter half of the twentieth century, Toppan fits his description. Toppan’s crimes—poisoning patients injecting them with a combination of morphine and atropine—hurt the credibility of professional medicine. To protect the public from other imposters, the medical community and state legislators implemented the standardization of nursing education and registration. Thus, Toppan’s crimes gave strength to those who supported particular medical reforms.

development had occurred in Toppan's physical/mental state. It is unclear if *The Washington Times* indeed shared new facts or omitted and modified certain information in order to re-popularize old news. That is not to say that Toppan did not attempt suicide more than once, however, due to an inability to access her medical files, that information cannot be confirmed in this thesis.

Two years later, in 1908, illustrations with stories about Toppan appeared in several newspapers. On February 17, 1908, *The Boston Post* published "Jane Toppan,



Refusing Food, Lives in Dread of Poisoning.” A relatively

small, yet provocative,

illustration accompanied the

narrative and took up more space than the text (figure 2-4).

Two images depicted Toppan at different stages in life. The

larger of the two

representations, situated on the

left, exhibited an image of a

younger, healthier Toppan. The

second image, positioned on the

right side of the illustration,

presented Toppan as thin, disheveled, and insane. Appearing shocked and scared, crazy

Toppan, near a table topped with food, faced a skeletal apparition materializing within



the steam of the meal.<sup>128</sup> Like the image that appeared in *The Washington Times*, the illustration blended “bad” and “mad” in one visual interpretation of Toppan, contributing to the criminalization of mental illness.

Less dramatic, but just as compelling, illustrations and photographs printed in medical books reveal ways in which scientific lines of thought used and contributed to the growth of mental health stereotypes. As previously mentioned, some popular medical lines of thought believed that a person’s moral character and/or mental state could be determined by facial bone structure and the shape of the head. While slightly different in their medical objectives and methods, phrenology and physiognomy analyzed facial features and bone structure in order to diagnose various health and mental disorders.<sup>129</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept of “rational order” provided American-Victorians a way to understand differences between cultures and “scientifically” justified the “othering” of particular populations of people.<sup>130</sup> This system of categorization, heavily informed by physical build and appearance, extended beyond racial classification to psychological classification. Phrenology and physiognomy asserted that an individual’s character or propensity for certain behaviors could be determined by the presence and size of particular physical traits.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “Jane Toppan, Refusing Food, Lives in Dread of Poisoning,” *The Boston Post*, February 17, 1908.

<sup>129</sup> Bridget M. Marshall, “The Face of Evil: Phrenology, Physiognomy, and the Gothic Villain,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 161.

<sup>130</sup> Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, 5, 7, Chapter 2.

<sup>131</sup> Sir Alexander Morrison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*, Second (London: Longman and Co., 1843); Alfred E. Willis, *Illustrated Physiognomy* (Chicago: Cameron, Amberg & Co., 1881). Physiognomy, as defined by Morrison, is “the appearance of the face [as] intimately connected with and dependant [sic] upon the state of the mind.” In 1881, Alfred E. Willis defined physiognomy as “first, as the revelation of the character or spirit of any living organic being, by and through the form, expression and color of the features; second, as the art and science of discerning and understanding the character so revealed to the observer.” He further explained that there existed two methods of reading

Abundant with illustrations, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* by Sir Alexander Morison provided evidence of the connection between mental illness and physical stereotypes. Morison claimed, “There is no class of diseases in which the study of Physiognomy is so necessary as that of Mental [sic] diseases.”<sup>132</sup> The book provided readers with visual examples of mental disorders alongside short explanations and descriptions. Focused on “mania” and its subtypes, each section began with an introduction to a particular mental illness displayed throughout its pages. Additionally, the book provided examples of some individuals during their state of mania and after treatment. The specific treatments, however, were not always mentioned.

The first illustration that appeared in the book portrayed a patient identified as “F.W.” (figure 2-5). This man, according to the explanation, suffered from “attacks of Mania [sic]” since childhood. His mania manifested in the form of “violent rage and fury” and “irascible emotions.” Apparently, during a

**Figure 2-5**



“Plate 1,” *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* by Sir Alexander Morison (London: Longman and Co., 1843).

“paroxysm of fury” he killed a person. The illustration depicted an angry looking man with a somewhat unkempt appearance, with large wide set eyes whose gaze was set

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character: first, by “impressibility—intuitive reasoning,” and second, “by comparison, aided by the perceptives [sic].”

<sup>132</sup> Morrison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*, unnumbered page near the beginning of the book.

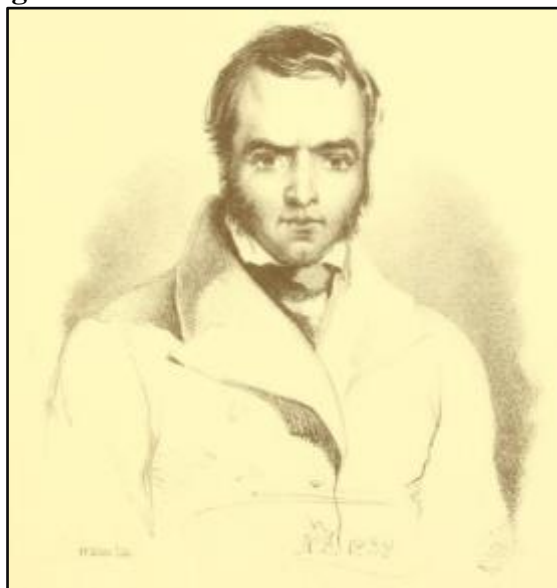
directly upon the viewer of the image. According to physiognomist Alfred E. Willis, “Mean-looking” eyes represented “a mean disposition of some kind.”<sup>133</sup> Phrenologists and physiognomists believed eyes provided much information about a person’s character and mental state.

The second illustration portrayed F.W. “in his sane state” (figure 2-6). In this portrait, a sober, well-dressed F.W. provided readers with an example of a maniac in a

normative or rehabilitated state. The two illustrations showed readers the dualistic nature of mental illness. The images provided readers visual definitions of “mania” and “normality,” as presented in men, and suggested that each state of being could be visually identified.

Additionally, these images, particularly the first, reinforced the connections between masculinity, violence, and mental illness. Essentially, mental illness in “masculine” males manifested itself in the form of violence.

**Figure 2-6**



“Plate 2,” *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* by Sir Alexander Morison (London: Longman and Co., 1843).

<sup>133</sup> Willis, *Illustrated Physiognomy*, 17, 22.

The next two images that appeared in the book portrayed “M.S.” (figure 2-7). The first image depicted “a young Woman in a state of Mania [sic].” The note alongside the image explained that the cause of her insanity was unknown, but that the woman had been “in low spirits for some months” and then she became “Maniacal. [sic]” The



illustration portrayed the woman as almost childlike in appearance. Her face appeared soft and round with full cheeks and a smile on her face. The gaze on the woman’s face looked away from the readers as if her attention were elsewhere. Covered by a simple bonnet, the hair framing her face appeared unevenly cut. The explanation which accompanied the illustration supports

the childlike quality of her appearance, “[T]he character of her disorder assumed that of gaiety and satisfaction; she was almost continually laughing or singing; her conversation was quite incoherent.” Unlike the first illustration of F.W., M.S. appeared safe, unassuming, and even happy.

The second illustration of M.S. portrayed a woman “restored to reason” (figure 2-8). In this illustration, the physical features of M.S. appeared radically transformed. Her face looked thinner, with a more pointed chin and dimples, and her torso depicted a womanlier figure. She came across as more focused with her gaze centered on the reader.

Even her hat and manner of dress reflected an elevation in her mental maturity. The treatments that supposedly restored her to health included “those generally used” along with “leeches to the head, blister to the nape of the neck, small doses of Tartarized Antimony and the Douche [sic].” Like the illustrations of F.W., the images of M.S. gave readers visual examples of female mental normality and abnormality. Mania in females seemingly manifested in the hyper-

**Figure 2-8**



“Plate 3,” *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* by Sir Alexander Morison (London: Longman and Co., 1843).

expression of childlike, yet feminine, characteristics. However, as the author demonstrated, this was not always the case.

In a section titled “Monomania with Vicious Propensities, Homicide” the author addressed the issue of criminal insanity. He explained “that a marked difference will be noticed between the insane murderer, the insane thief, and the insane drunkard.” He continued by stating that acquitting a criminal on grounds of insanity should take place after “very careful and deliberate inquiry.” Homicide and those acquitted of that crime due to mental illness, the author explained, “have been committed by different descriptions of the insane.”<sup>134</sup> Basically, he declared that “murder mania,” as a mental disorder in and of itself, did not exist and that those deemed insane who had committed

<sup>134</sup> Morrison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*.

homicide represented a variety of mental illnesses. Interestingly, of the five plates depicting people with violent forms of “monomania,” three were women, two of whom had murdered their own children. While the physical appearance of the murderous women greatly differed, according to analysis based in physiognomy, they shared several characteristics. For example, the eyes of each woman, while quite large, were not evenly shaped and/or were not proportional to the arch of their brows, supposedly indicating a lack of “admirable trait[s] of character.”<sup>135</sup>

Certain physical traits given to Toppan in newspaper illustrations held significance and communicated specific messages. Through the lens of physiognomy, newspaper illustrations that depicted Toppan’s physical decline could also be read as devolution in her moral character. Furthermore, media dissemination of such images stigmatized mental illness and reinforced stereotypes associated between physical appearance, behavior, and mental health. Born of fear, stereotypes are “harmful generalizations that deny an individual’s unique contribution to humanity.” Historically, journalistic media actively engaged in the use of stereotypes which perpetuated “misleading representations about members from diverse cultural groups,” including the mentally ill.<sup>136</sup> As a type of coping mechanism, the creation of stigmas and stereotypes occurs in response to someone or something perceived as threatening. Due to a certain degree of removal from the illustrated scenario, stereotype laden visual narratives provided readers/viewers a “safe” way to indulge their curiosities and interact with

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<sup>135</sup> Willis, *Illustrated Physiognomy*, 31.

<sup>136</sup> Paul Martin Lester, ed., *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), xi.

“dangerous” individuals and “threatening” topics.<sup>137</sup> Fantasies, as immaterial products of the imagination, lack the ability to harm. Therefore, “it is “safer” to fantasize about something unlikely to occur,” such as serial murders committed by insane women, “than about death from cancer or Parkinson’s.”<sup>138</sup> Journalists who used stereotypes to sensationalize crime committed by insane individuals, and doctors who relied to stereotypes to diagnose and treat psychiatric disorders, defined “normality” and heightened the level of fear and suspicion surrounding those with mental illness.

Publishing images depicting mental illness in newspapers represented an “underlying desire to police the boundaries of normality.”<sup>139</sup> By correlating madness with crime, newspapers unofficially defined those with mental illness (despite any criminal conviction) as unsafe and unfit to interact with the public. As such, newspapers encouraged the incarceration of mentally ill people in asylums, thus reinforcing the “need” for separate spheres, by exploiting readers' emotions. Moreover, examination of newspaper articles about murderous women offers a means to historicize journalistic narratives and perceptions of crime and mental health.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Vicki Goldberg, “Death Takes a Holiday, Sort Of,” in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27–52.

<sup>139</sup> Eisenhauer, “A Visual Culture of Stigma: Critically Examining Representations of Mental Illness,” 16.

CHAPTER IV  
POUNDS OF ARSENIC AND NO LACE: SYMPATHY, JOURNALISM, AND THE  
DEATH PENALTY

Scholars Journalistic writing styles reflected changes and shifts in American society. For example, “hard” news reporting styles that relied on the emotional language of “soft news” developed in reaction to changing and evolving interpretations of “true womanhood” and separate spheres.<sup>140</sup> Typically associated with the reporting habits of female journalists, the practice of “sympathetic” or “sentimental” journalism offered reporters another way to “interpret the social world.”<sup>141</sup> Popular female journalists such as Margaret Fuller, Nellie Bly, Dorothea Dix, and others, cemented the connection between emotional, sympathetic journalism and female reporters.<sup>142</sup> However, both male and female journalists incorporated “emotionality” into “sensation” writing.<sup>143</sup> Though often lacking elements that resulted in reactions of shock and excitement, subjectively written articles were no less sensational than their thrilling counterparts. Furthermore, the

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<sup>140</sup> Jean Marie Lutes, “Into the Madhouse with Nellie Bly: Girl Stunt Reporting in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (June 2002): 219; Abramson, *Sob Sister Journalism*, 2–4.

<sup>141</sup> Lutes, “Sob Sister Revisited,” 504–5; Mark Allen Peterson, “Getting to the Story: Unwriteable Discourse and Interpretive Practice in American Journalism,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (October 2001): 201.

<sup>142</sup> Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women’s Business*, 7–12; Lutes, “Sob Sister Revisited,” 504. During the nineteenth century, like most aspects of society, sentimentality became gendered, associated with the perceived female inclination toward “emotionality.” Fuller, Bly, and Dix each filled different journalistic roles. Roggenkamp noted that Fuller is considered a “literary critic” whereas Bly fulfilled the role of “reporter” (see *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime* page 12.) Lutes identified Dix as one of the original “sob sisters” (see “Sob Sister Revisited” page 504.)

<sup>143</sup> Newspaper articles rarely included the name of the author, and if an article did include an author’s name, the gender of that author could not be assumed because many journalists wrote under pennames. By linking the practice solely with female reporters reinforces the notion that male writers lacked the capability to employ sentimentality in their writing. Therefore, it cannot be argued that only female journalists during the era employed writing techniques that incorporated “emotionality.”



use of emotional language and writing styles in subjective journalism allowed reporters to advocate and participate in, or oppose, various social reforms such as the anti-death penalty movement. By advocating for the abolition of capital punishment for both sane and insane individuals, even indirectly, both reformers and newspapers justified the “need” for separate spheres.

From 1890 to 1920, amid movements to reform working conditions, education, public health, and women’s rights, the anti-death penalty movement experienced a resurgence.<sup>144</sup> The “anti-gallows movement” (c. 1785-1865) had minimal success and lost popularity with the commencement of the Civil War, public focus on the abolition of slavery, and the rise of the women’s rights movement.<sup>145</sup> However, between 1897 and 1917 social reformers in the United States once again questioned the constitutionality of capital punishment.<sup>146</sup> With increased understanding of mental health and illness, many people debated definitions of “intent” and “responsibility” and questioned whether or not the courts had executed innocent people. By 1917, “ten American states abolished the death penalty.”<sup>147</sup> Murderous women, due to the complex nature of their social deviance, complicated questions pertaining to criminal responsibility, moral agency, and capital punishment.

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<sup>144</sup> John F. Galliher, Gregory Ray, and Brent Cook, “Abolition and Reinstatement of Capital Punishment During the Progressive Era and Early 20th Century,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 83, no. 3 (1992): 538–40.

<sup>145</sup> David Brion Davis, “The Movement to Abolish Capital Punishment in America, 1787-1861,” *The American Historical Review* 63, no. 1 (October 1957): 23–46; Herbert H. Haines, *Against Capital Punishment: The Anti-Death Penalty Movement in America, 1972-1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8–10. Between 1787 and 1861 reformers eliminated “public hangings,” instead, several states adopted the practice of “private hangings” but death-penalty abolitionists felt this only concealed the “horror and ugliness” of execution rather than resolve the issue.

<sup>146</sup> Galliher, Ray, and Cook, “Abolition and Reinstatement of Capital Punishment During the Progressive Era and Early 20th Century,” 538.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

Amy Archer Gilligan appeared to fulfill all the expectations of “true womanhood.”<sup>148</sup> As a twice widowed mother, Gilligan realized the duties of her sex by bringing up a daughter, Mary Archer, and managing a convalescent home that she and her first husband opened prior to his death. But things were not necessarily what they seemed. In July 1917, despite a plea of innocence, Gilligan was sentenced to death after being convicted for the first-degree murder of Franklin R. Andrews, one of her patients.<sup>149</sup> Death, however, was not an unusual occurrence in Gilligan’s line of work. She provided hospice care in the convalescent home, thus, there existed an expectation of death associated with her profession. She was tried on only one account of murder, but the “State contended that,” while in Gilligan’s care, “as many as forty inmates had died under peculiar circumstances,” including Michael Gilligan, her second husband.<sup>150</sup> The prosecution argued that greed motivated Gilligan to quietly poison her elderly patients. Gilligan charged “generally \$1000,” from “the aged people” who came to live out the rest of their days in her home. The prosecution claimed that Gilligan slipped arsenic into her patients’ drinks in order to quickly make room for new “inmates” (a term used at the time period to describe patients who received long-term medical care in hospitals or nursing homes), thereby increasing her profits.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 66–69; M. William Phelps, *The Devil’s Rooming House: The True Story of America’s Deadliest Female Serial Killer* (Guilford: Lyon’s Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>149</sup> “Mrs. Gilligan Found Guilty; To Be Hanged,” *The New York Tribune*, July 14, 1917.

<sup>150</sup> “Convicted of Murdering Elderly Inmate of Home,” *The Evening Star*, July 14, 1917.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* The play *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a dark comedy by Joseph Kesselring, may have been inspired by Gilligan’s trial. It has been noted Kesselring travelled to Connecticut to research court records and interview people involved in the trial. The play and the events surrounding Gilligan tended to mirror each other. For example, in the play, two eccentric old ladies, the Brewster sisters, rent rooms in their home to unsuspecting male victims. Gilligan accepted payment to house dying individuals. The theatrical story line included bodies of murdered victims being buried in the basement. During the Gilligan investigation, “secret graves” were sought for under “the cellar floor.” The sisters poisoned their victims by lacing

Believing Gilligan was the victim of a conspiracy, Mary diligently defended her mother's innocence. Both women claimed angry, spiteful neighbors accused Gilligan of murder. In 1916, during the initial investigation, *The New York Tribune* printed Gilligan's declaration of innocence. Avoiding confession, Gilligan willingly aided police in their investigation with the understanding that "all notoriety would be avoided," a promise which was not upheld. Gilligan expressed concern for her reputation, claiming the public did not know the "real facts" behind her arrest. She described herself as "a forlorn, defenseless, innocent woman," a widow, and a single mother. Additionally, the narrative described Mary's anguish with the high publicity surrounding the case.<sup>152</sup> By illustrating herself in that way, Gilligan victimized herself in order to gain sympathy from the public, especially from women—mothers and widows in particular—who could "easily identify" with Gilligan.

Despite the fact that Gilligan had not yet been tried or convicted, the article printed in *The New York Tribune* presented information in a way that made her appear guilty. The article included statements from the police and Ralph Frost, an undertaker from Windsor, Connecticut, who removed corpses from Gilligan's home, and told of a secret autopsy performed on Andrew's body. The article continued, listing the names and causes of death for the people police accused Gilligan of murdering and then quoted

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elderberry wine with arsenic. Allegedly, Gilligan used the same deadly substance. (See M. William Phelps, *The Devil's Rooming House: The True Story of America's Deadliest Female Serial Killer* (Guilford: Lyon's Press, 2010), 81, 242–43; "Asolo Soon to Open 'Arsenic and Old Lace,'" *Sarasota Journal*, April 25, 1974; Bill Ryan, "Whatever Went Wrong With Amy?," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1997; Joseph Kesselring, *Arsenic and Old Lace* (New York: Dramatist Play Services, Inc., 1942), 22–26, 45–46, 64–68; "Grave Gives Up Poison Victims as Woman Is Held," *The Evening World*, May 10, 1916; Dustin Harp, *Desperately Seeking Women Readers: U.S. Newspapers and the Construction of a Female Readership* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007.))

<sup>152</sup> "Gilligan's Body to Be Exhumed," *The New York Tribune*, May 13, 1916.

County Coroner J. Gilbert Calhoun who stated that Gilligan “must have had an accomplice.”<sup>153</sup> Typically considered more reliable than commentary from accused criminals, statements from officials can manipulate the public’s perceptions of individuals accused of committing crimes. In Gilligan’s case, by including insinuating and accusatory statements from officials, newspapers molded a negative public image of Gilligan that made her appear guilty before the investigation had ended.

A few days later on May 18, 1916, *The New York Sun* published “Inmate of Gilligan Home Mad from Fear” that described the condition of Mrs. Gladding, one of Gilligan’s former convalescing tenants. After being removed from Gilligan’s home, Mrs. Gladding’s son described his mother as a “raving lunatic.” He stated that Gladding had an irrational fear of women, including her own daughter, and that she continuously spoke of a woman in black. Her grandson then reported that Gladding possessed good clothes when placed in the home, but upon her removal, very few of her items were found; even her false teeth were missing.<sup>154</sup> Articles that implied theft or mistreatment of her patients steered public opinion in a direction that condemned Gilligan before the trial even began.

News reports filled with sympathetic tones toward Gilligan appeared almost as quickly as accusatory articles. On May 24, 1916, *The Tacoma Times* published “Aged Inmates Helping Woman in Poison Case.” The short article explained that Gilligan’s remaining patients “rallied about her with thanks for her kindness to them, and contributions from their petty savings, to help in her almost friendless fight against the state.” One patient described Gilligan as “a frail hardworked, little woman” who had

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<sup>153</sup> “Woman Calls Poison Charge a Spite Plot,” *The New York Tribune*, May 11, 1916; “Gilligan’s Body to Be Exhumed.”

<sup>154</sup> “Inmate of Gilligan Home Mad from Fear,” *The New York Sun*, May 18, 1916.

“been victimized by a spiteful conspiracy on the part of neighbors.”<sup>155</sup> Articles of this type attempted to counter accusations of guilt by providing the public with “character witnesses.” Testimonies from the remaining patients in Gilligan’s home printed in newspapers showed the public another side to the story by placing Gilligan within a role society perceived as suitable for her sex: matron, nurse, mother, nurturer, and care-giver.

Descriptive language like “frail hardworked, little woman” reminded readers of Gilligan’s unique situation. As a woman, society expected Gilligan to possess and exemplify the virtues of “true womanhood.” By defending her, Gilligan’s remaining patients seemed to believe she had been meeting those demands. As a mother, society expected Gilligan to tend to the educational, emotional, and spiritual needs of her children. As a widow, lacking the financial support or physical protection of a husband, Gilligan became the head of her family and business. The success of both relied on her ability to work long hours and maintain a steady income. Thus, from the viewpoint of one of Gilligan’s patients, the phrase “frail hardworked, little woman” illustrated for readers the image of a woman worth of sympathy and understanding rather than a murderer deserving of condemnation.

Unlike Mitchell and Toppan, Gilligan’s lawyer intentionally did not pursue an insanity plea during the first trial, but according to some newspaper sources Gilligan was “violently insane.”<sup>156</sup> Gilligan did come under observation of psychologists after her arrest who determined that she had suffered a bout of “prison psychosis,” defined in one

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<sup>155</sup> “Aged Inmates Helping Woman in Poison Case,” *The Tacoma Times*, May 24, 1916.

<sup>156</sup> “May Never Try Poison Charge,” *The Boston Post*, June 7, 1916; “Mrs. Gilligan Insane,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 1916; “Mrs. Archer-Gilligan Insane,” *The Washington Herald*, June 7, 1916; “Alleged Slayer Is Insane,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, June 11, 1916.

newspaper report as “a mental defect that is common to prisoners charged with a crime of such a nature.”<sup>157</sup> However, officials viewed this as a condition that developed after to her arrest. While not necessarily sympathetic in tone, early articles that questioned Gilligan’s mental state created a foundation for the future success of sympathetically written newspaper reports by encouraging readers to see Gilligan’s situation from a different perspective. Hazel Mackenzie explained, “By encouraging their readers to practice a sympathetic outlook on the world,” journalists encouraged readers “to turn the disciplinary gaze inwards, to imagine someone always watching and judging their conduct.”<sup>158</sup> With regard to Gilligan’s case, a shift in perspective, guided and encouraged by media outlets, had the potential to affect readers’ emotional reactions to Gilligan as they sympathized with either the accused criminal or her victims.

At one point during the initial trial, Gilligan’s attorney allowed a fellow inmate to testify “to an alleged confession by” Gilligan with the goal of showing the jury that “at the time the woman [Gilligan] was in such a mental state as to be practically insane.” However, he then reminded the jury “that insanity would not be claimed as a defense.”<sup>159</sup> While newspaper reports did not provide explanations, several reasons exist as to why the defense did not pursue an insanity plea. First, to an extent, claiming insanity implied that the defense acknowledged and accepted that Gilligan’s actions resulted in the deaths of her patients. Second, by implying that Gilligan suffered from mental illness, her lawyer may have attempted to implant a modicum of doubt in the minds of the jurors. If

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<sup>157</sup> “Postpone Trial of Woman Accused of Slaying Five,” *The Boston Herald*, December 20, 1916.

<sup>158</sup> Hazel Mackenzie, “The Discipline of Sympathy and the Limits of Omniscience in Nineteenth-Century Journalism,” *Critical Survey* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 67–68.

<sup>159</sup> “Begin Fight to Save Mrs. Amy E. A. Gilligan,” *The Boston Daily Globe*, July 7, 1917.

successful, that strategy could have resulted in a hung jury and possible acquittal. With an acquittal or a not-guilty verdict, Gilligan could return to her normal routine and way of life, free of the stigmas associated with mental illness and female crime. Unfortunately, without access to Gilligan's legal case or medical files, these theories cannot be confirmed.<sup>160</sup>

Despite the defense's concerted effort to prove Gilligan's innocence, the prosecution prevailed when the jury declared Gilligan guilty of murder. The trial lasted four weeks, beginning in June 1917 and ending the following July. According to newspaper reports, the jury deliberated for a mere 15 or 16 minutes before declaring the verdict. The judge's sentence followed swiftly. Gilligan was sentenced to hang on

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<sup>160</sup> On September 14, 2015 the Supreme Court of Connecticut permanently sealed Amy Archer Gilligan's psychiatric and medical records. The issue of Gilligan's records first arose in 2010 when Ron Robillard, who intended to research and write a book about Gilligan and early twentieth century mental health treatments, "filed a freedom of information request with the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction services seeking all of Gilligan's psychiatric and medical files." *The Hartford Courant* reported that state officials were concerned that "releasing the records would violate Gilligan's personal privacy." In an article about the Supreme Court's choice to seal the files, *NewsTimes.com*, an internet news source based in Danbury, Connecticut, reported that the Supreme Court's actions "not only did a disservice to historical knowledge, it also helped perpetuate cruel caricatures of the mentally ill, the very people the majority claims it is trying to protect." Without access to historical information, especially when it relates to science and medicine, it becomes nearly impossible in the present moment to make informed choices that can potentially affect the future in drastic ways. The actions of the Supreme Court of Connecticut have complicated the work of future researchers. The issue, however, is not one of public accessibility to historical medical records, but an issue regarding the *purpose* of medical records of deceased individuals and privacy rights *for the dead*. From an historian's point of view, records, medical or otherwise, are kept and created with the intention to create and preserve historical memory so that future generations can be informed by voices of the past. After a designated amount of time, and if there are no remaining family members, the medical records of deceased individuals should be made available to the public for research related purposes. See Dave Altimari, "High Court to Consider Whether Arsenic Murderer's Medical Records are Public," *The Hartford Courant*, December 22, 2014. Accessed April 13, 2017. <http://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-arsenic-old-lace-supreme-court-p-20141221-story.html>; "Ron Robillard: State Court Wrong to Hide 'Arsenic and Old Lace' Killer's Records," September 23, 2015. Accessed April 13, 2017. <http://www.newstimes.com/news/article/State-court-wrong-to-hide-killer-s-records-6522082.php>; Dave Altimari, "Records of 'Arsenic and Old Lace' Killer to Remain Secret," *The Hartford Courant*, September 14, 2015. Accessed April 13, 2017. <http://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-arsenic-old-lace-medical-records-20150914-story.html>

November 6, 1917, giving her just enough time to fight for an appeal.<sup>161</sup> Anti-death penalty activists fought to end capital punishment in part because death penalty trials came to swift conclusions followed by prompt punishments. Reformers recognized that quick punishment “was a necessary ingredient of the deterrence formula,” but believed that justice “became secondary” in speedy trial conclusions.<sup>162</sup>

Capital punishment has long been a controversial subject in the United States. And, as with most political topics, newspapers tended to support one side or the other of the death-penalty issue. Newspapers that supported the death penalty attempted to manipulate readers’ sense of fear to justify capital punishment. For example, in 1916 Tennessee legislators debated the Bowers Act, a bill to abolish capital punishment “for all crimes except that of rape.”<sup>163</sup> On January 14, 1916, an editorial in *The Columbia Herald* argued, “This change will encourage mob law.” It continued, “There are men in this state, who with the fear of death as penalty removed, will not hesitate to take all the many chances of escape or pardon, and ruthlessly slay their fellow man either without provocation or for a price.”<sup>164</sup> With a focus on “mob law” and possibility of unpunishable and repeatable murder, the reporter justified capital punishment by claiming that it maintained order and prevented social chaos. Success of the reporter’s fear based tactic relied on the ability of the readers to “sympathize with [the author’s] fear or resentment.”<sup>165</sup> In this context, readers were not meant to sympathize with the criminal,

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<sup>161</sup> “Woman Sentenced to Hang,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 14, 1917; “Mrs. Gilligan Found Guilty; To Be Hanged”; “Mrs. Gilligan Found Guilty, Must Hang,” *The New York Sun*, July 14, 1917.

<sup>162</sup> Mark Gado, *Death Row Women: Murder, Justice and the New York Press* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 4–5.

<sup>163</sup> “Bowers Bill Valid Act,” *The Lexington Progress*, January 14, 1916.

<sup>164</sup> “Capital Punishment,” *The Columbia Herald*, January 14, 1916.

<sup>165</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6–7.



but with the author's emotion in relation to "the person or object being judged."<sup>166</sup>

Due to stereotypical notions of crime and gender, newspaper articles that addressed the topic of capital punishment contributed to the masculinization of crime. In the same editorial in *The Columbia Herald*, the journalist used only masculine pronouns in reference to the hypothetical murderous criminal.<sup>167</sup> As examined in chapter two, American Victorian society perceived violent behavior as an inherently masculine regression to baser human instincts. Victorian concepts of gender and crime permeated popular and medical schools of thought. Therefore, during the 1910s, when constructing hypothetical scenarios that involved capital offenses and the death-penalty, journalists described imaginary criminals as men rather than women.

Since colonial times, Americans have expressed an aversion to putting women to death. It has been claimed that women tend to receive more lenient punishments when convicted of murder.<sup>168</sup> This gender-based inconsistency in exacting capital punishment did not go unnoticed by the press. For example, in November 1844 an editorial in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* seemed to support the death penalty gender imbalance in the statement, "To hang a man is bad enough, but to hang a *woman*, in this day of light and knowledge, is awful. [sic]"<sup>169</sup> Although discussion about the gender inequality in relation to capital punishment carried over from colonial times into the following centuries, the chivalrous sentiment of the statement in *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* did not. For instance, in February 1916, an editorial in *The Washington Herald* that supported capital punishment

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<sup>166</sup> Fonna Forman Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>167</sup> "Capital Punishment."

<sup>168</sup> Gado, *Death Row Women: Murder, Justice and the New York Press*, 174.

<sup>169</sup> "The Trial of Polly Bodine," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 27, 1844.

claimed that “In all trials of women for murder the public accepts acquittal as a foregone conclusion. The possibility of conviction is scarcely considered.” It continued, stating that “sensational and widely advertised cases” involving an accused murderous woman “presents a danger to society” because “with no fear of punishment” women would repeatedly commit and get away with murder.<sup>170</sup> Scholars have developed a variety of theories in an attempt to explain the disparity in executions among men and women. The most common theories adopted by scholars include the *chivalry theory* and the *evil woman theory*.<sup>171</sup> Articles about capital punishment in early twentieth century newspapers provide examples for these theoretical explanations.

The *chivalry theory* suggests that fewer women than men receive death sentences “because American society maintains a stereotypical view of women as weak, passive and requiring male protection.”<sup>172</sup> Concepts related to *chivalry theory* appeared in the previously mentioned *Washington Herald* article. The article noted that juries of men “steadfastly refuse to condemn a woman” to the “gallows or chair,” and urged male jurors to “recognize their own weakness when the gentler sex is concerned.” The article concluded with a call for more equality in capital punishment.<sup>173</sup> Asserting that male jurors refused to send guilty women to the “gallows or chair” based on men’s “own weakness” regarding “the gentler sex” firmly places the journalist’s theoretical approach within the *chivalry theory*. Society expected men to develop qualities such as “physical courage, chivalric ideals, [and] virtuous fortitude with additional connotations of military

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<sup>170</sup> “One Law for Man, Another for Woman,” *The Washington Herald*, February 6, 1916.

<sup>171</sup> David B. Baker, *Women and Capital Punishment in the United States: An Analytical History* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 6–10.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>173</sup> “One Law for Man, Another for Woman.”

and patriotic virtue.”<sup>174</sup> As such, male jurors operated outside of their “sphere” by laying aside their “chivalric ideals” when convicting and calling for the execution of a woman, as did judges when sentencing female criminals to death. Male jurors, perceiving themselves as chivalrous, wanted to protect, rather than harm “weak, passive” women.

In direct opposition to the *chivalry theory*, the *evil woman theory* asserts that “capital justice agents treat women as harshly as men when they commit heinous murders that challenge conventional notions of ‘womanliness.’”<sup>175</sup> Viewed as “evil incarnate,” lethal ladies violated “gender-specific roles such as mother, wife, or caregiver” making them *deserving* of capital punishment.<sup>176</sup> Mark Gado postulated that “society has to see these women as evil, beyond redemption, and unworthy of compassion” in order to justify the executions of murderous females. According to Gado, “thoroughly hostile and, at times, hateful” media aided in shaping negative views of women accused of homicide by dehumanizing the criminal.<sup>177</sup> For example, during her first trial, several newspaper articles compared Gilligan to previously known and convicted murderers, including Jane Toppan who also had been de-humanized by the media.<sup>178</sup> On May 10, 1916, shortly after police arrested Gilligan, the headline of *The Seattle Star* read, “Old Folks’ Home a Murder Factory?” The corresponding article declared that police considered exhuming the bodies of “48 inmates” and described Gilligan’s home as a possible “murder castle.”<sup>179</sup> An article published the next day in *The Daily Capital Journal* also described

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<sup>174</sup> J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>175</sup> Baker, *Women and Capital Punishment in the United States: An Analytical History*, 7.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Gado, *Death Row Women: Murder, Justice and the New York Press*, 4–5.

<sup>178</sup> “Inquest Starts in Poison Cases,” *The Boston Post*, May 11, 1916.

<sup>179</sup> “To Exhume Bodies of 48 Inmates,” *The Seattle Star*, May 10, 1916.

Gilligan's home as a "murder castle" and then compared it to the "Guinness farm."<sup>180</sup> Newspapers dehumanized Gilligan by comparing her to murderous women who had already been barbarized by the media and who society already perceived as "evil incarnate." The initial shocking and sensational coverage about Gilligan functioned within the *evil woman theory*, labeled her as "bad," and set a precedent for readers to sympathize with the victims before Gilligan's guilt could be established.

Curiously, in their analyses of the *evil woman theory* as it relates to journalism, neither Gado nor Baker connected the media's public castigation of accused criminals, male or female, to social rituals of punishment. Michel Foucault explained that public punishment of criminals served several purposes: a form of entertainment, an intended crime deterrent, and a way to punish the social deviant, each achieving varying levels of success.<sup>181</sup> Historically, scaffolds and gallows functioned as stages for public displays of ritual punishment and torture, functioning as theatrical forms of entertainment. Over time, though, criminal punishment moved out of public arenas into enclosed spaces such as dungeons and prisons, thus barring public participation in criminal punishment.<sup>182</sup> By treating accused criminals in a "hostile" manner and by publishing reports about murder investigations and trials, newspapers and other forms of media became culturally symbolic scaffolds, satiating the public's desire to witness, and thus guarantee, the fulfillment of punishment. Additionally, such media behavior provided the public opportunities to vicariously participate in the crime, investigation, judgment, and

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<sup>180</sup> "Archer Home May Be as Bad as Guinness Farm," *The Daily Capital Journal*, May 11, 1916.

<sup>181</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 116.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

enactment of punishment.<sup>183</sup>

Society became uncomfortable executing both women and mentally ill individuals guilty of committing capital crimes. Those of unsound mind who committed crimes, according to Foucault, could not be declared “both guilty and mad.”<sup>184</sup> In 1919, Henry W. Ballantine argued, “Crime does not exist unless the actor can be regarded as morally responsible for his act. If not, he is not culpable and does not deserve punishment.”<sup>185</sup> A diagnosis of insanity could effectively absolve a person of responsibility for the crime and prevent certain forms of punishment. However, as examined in the previous chapters, mentally ill criminals could not avoid punishment all together. The criminally insane typically experienced life-long confinement in mental institutions and asylums, a consequence most of society viewed as meeting the demands of justice but merciful toward the insane criminal.

Ballantine noted that “In nearly every capital charge when other defences appear hopeless, insanity is put forward as a last resort. [sic]”<sup>186</sup> Gilligan’s case followed that pattern. Although she initially denied “insanity,” Gilligan changed her plea during the course of the second trial. At first Gilligan claimed that a morphine addiction caused the mental illness that drove her to kill Andrews. News of an addiction caused the prosecutor to question whether Gilligan “was a free moral agent because of her use of drugs.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Lane, *Murder in America: A History*, 50; Gado, *Death Row Women: Murder, Justice and the New York Press*, 4–5.

<sup>184</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 19–20.

<sup>185</sup> Henry W. Ballantine, “Criminal Responsibility of the Insane and Feeble Minded,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 9, no. 4 (1919): 492.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

<sup>187</sup> “Woman Wins in Fight for Life,” *The Reading News-Times*, July 2, 1919; “Mrs. Gilligan Pleads Guilty,” *The New York Tribune*, July 2, 1919; Edward H. Smith, “Mrs. Amy Archer Gilligan, a Modern Lucretia Borgia,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, July 27, 1919. After the second trial was well under way,

Drug abuse, not genetics, caused her supposed madness, making her a “victim of her own nature.”<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, it meant that Gilligan had potential for redemption. Though claiming insanity seemingly saved her from the gallows, newspaper coverage about Gilligan reveals that she secured her appeal and avoided the death penalty primarily due to newspaper reports about her daughter, Mary. By exploiting Mary’s situation, journalists and social activists garnered public support that prevented Gilligan’s execution.

Two social reformers, Mrs. Cecelia Blickensderfer, a millionaire’s wife, and Caroline Fuller of the Woman’s University Club in New York, helped Mary Archer secure an appeal for her mother.<sup>189</sup> From 1840 until World War I, many women, especially elite- and middle-class women, advocated for various reform efforts including the abolition of the death penalty.<sup>190</sup> Blickensderfer’s and Fuller’s positions in society allowed them to become “public mothers.”<sup>191</sup> Politically active, educated, and community oriented women found ways to justify new opportunities for women outside the family.<sup>192</sup> Through a sense of sorority, “public mothers” crossed class boundaries, working to

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Gilligan’s case took another unexpected turn. “In the midst of retrial, Mrs. Gilligan stopped the proceedings” and pled guilty to second-degree murder. Her confession resulted in a life-sentence. However, after a few years of prison incarceration, doctors officially declared Gilligan insane and transferred her to the state mental health institution, where she remained until her death in 1962. Due to the inability to access her medical and psychiatric files, it is impossible to determine how her initial insanity claim affected that course of her second trial, whether or not her plea change affected her course of punishment, or why doctors diagnosed her as insane so long after her incarceration. (See Edward H. Smith, “Mrs. Amy Archer Gilligan, a Modern Lucretia Borgia,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, July 27, 1919.)

<sup>188</sup> Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 136.

<sup>189</sup> “To Save Her From Gallows,” *The Daily Gate City and Constitution-Democrat*, July 16, 1917; “Try to Save Her,” *The Topeka State Journal*, July 16, 1917; “Woman Aids Fight For Mrs. Gilligan,” *The New York Sun*, November 20, 1917; “Local Woman Aids Mrs. Amy Gilligan,” *The Day*, November 19, 1917.

<sup>190</sup> Naomi Rosenthal et al., “Social Movements and Network Analysis: A Case Study of Nineteenth-Century’s Women’s Reform in New York State,” *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 5 (March 1985): 1025.

<sup>191</sup> Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 263; Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality*, 3.

<sup>192</sup> Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 143.

improve health, education, and working conditions for women and children who did not have the means or support to rally for reform on their own.<sup>193</sup> Claiming woman's perceived moral superiority, women like Blickensderfer and Fuller took upon themselves the task of "nurturing" the public sphere. This reinterpretation of "spheres" justified an increased presence of women in public arenas. The connection between "private feeling and public action" gave "public mothers" the power to instigate change.

Blickensderfer and Fuller used the media to remind the public that Connecticut had not executed a woman since 1786 a streak they did not want to end, and accomplished their goal by giving the media the opportunity to exploit Gilligan's case from Mary's point of view.<sup>194</sup> In an interview with *The New York Tribune* on July 16, 1917, Blickensderfer stated, "It is for that poor, friendless little Mary Archer that I am especially empathetic."<sup>195</sup> The next day, *The New York Sun* quoted Blickensderfer, "For that faithful and plucky little girl, Mary Archer, I have a woman's heartfelt sympathy," a comment that reflected the belief that "sympathy" was a purely feminine trait.<sup>196</sup>

Blickensderfer explained that she had not met Mary, but after reading of Mary's

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 263–64.

<sup>194</sup> "2 Women Head Life Battle," *The Evening News*, July 16, 1917; "Local Woman Aids Mrs. Amy Gilligan"; "To Save Her From Gallows"; *ibid.*; Andrea Shapiro, "Unequal Before the Law: Men, Women and the Death Penalty," *The Journal of Gender, Social Policy, and the Law* 8, no. 2 (2000): 435; Victor L. Streib, "Juvenile's Attitudes Toward Their Impending Executions," in *Facing the Death Penalty: Essays on a Cruel and Unusual Punishment*, ed. Michael L. Radelet (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 42–47; Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 91–93. Hannah Ocuish, a "mentally retarded" twelve-year-old Native American girl, received a death sentence for the "murder of a six-year old child of a well-to-do family in Connecticut." This example also shows how the definitions of "woman" have changed over time. Ocuish was referred to as a "woman," yet in the twenty-first century a twelve-year-old individual is considered a child or pre-teen. In 2012, Governor Malloy abolished capital punishment in Connecticut when he signed Substitute Senate Bill No. 280, public act number 12-5, making the maximum sentence for murder "life imprisonment without the possibility of release." See Connecticut Substitute Senate Bill No. 280, Public Act No. 15-5.

<sup>195</sup> "Mrs. Blickensderfer To Aid Mrs. Gilligan," *The New York Tribune*, July 16, 1917.

<sup>196</sup> "Women Plan Fight for Mrs. Gilligan," *The New York Sun*, July 17, 1917.

“constant devotion to her mother” Blickensderfer felt compelled to create “a general plan to save Mrs. Gilligan from the gallows.” An article for *New Castle News* stated that Blickensderfer gained support from “prominent Connecticut club women” but later noted that “if appeals to the court fail to set aside the death sentence, they [Blickensderfer and the club women] will ask women all over the country to address petitions to the board of pardons asking commutation to life imprisonment.”<sup>197</sup> As indicated in an article in *The New York Times*, the public seemed responsive to Blickensderfer’s cause. The article stated that Mrs. Blickensderfer had been asked by the Governor not to flood his office with petitions and directed her to have petitions sent to the “State Board of Pardons.”<sup>198</sup>

On November 20, 1917, *The New York Sun* reported that Fuller “inaugurated” a fundraiser for Gilligan on Mary’s behalf. The article included the contents of a letter Fuller sent to “prominent people” throughout New England that asked for “assistance in raising a fund to procure [Gilligan] a second trial.” The letter noted that Gilligan was “without funds and has no relatives” except for Mary “who is struggling under this heavy burden alone.” The letter ended by asking the recipient for “a contribution of \$25,” or any sum no matter its amount, to aid Mary, “who is making a brave fight for her mother’s life.”<sup>199</sup> Instead of trying to justify roles for Gilligan or Mary “outside the family,” Blickensderfer, Fuller, and newspapers that supported their cause situated Gilligan and Mary in journalistic narratives in a way that emphasized the importance of traditional gender and familial roles. Describing Mary as “faithful” and “loyal” and stressing her companionless effort to save her mother placed Mary within the iconic role of the self-

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<sup>197</sup> “Hope to Save Mrs. Gilligan,” *New Castle News*, July 16, 1917.

<sup>198</sup> “Stay for Mrs. Gilligan,” *The New York Times*, July 18, 1917.

<sup>199</sup> “Woman Aids Fight For Mrs. Gilligan.”



sacrificing young woman, an image that permeated Victorian sentimental culture.<sup>200</sup>

Mary fulfilled the social expectations of daughters by standing devoutly alongside Gilligan throughout the trials. Yet neither the journalists nor the women who came to Mary's aid described her as a strong, smart young woman, capable of overcoming the trials caused by her mother's actions. Rather, Mary was portrayed as a helpless child.

At the time of her mother's trial, Mary was eighteen years old. By twenty-first century standards, Mary had reached adulthood by the time of Gilligan's arrest, but early twentieth century Americans understood parent-child relationships in different terms. To Victorians, the mother-daughter bond was central to the complex homosocial relationships of women. Mothers and daughters relied on each other emotionally and were most "comfortable" when the two "labored together, away from father, for survival."<sup>201</sup> Indeed, Mary and Gilligan were in such a situation. With both her father and step-father dead, Mary had everything to lose should her mother be put to death. Typically mother-daughter relationships ended with the marriage of the daughter. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg described marriage during the American Victorian era as "a girl's traumatic removal from her mother and her mother's network."<sup>202</sup> In this case, Gilligan's and Mary's mother-daughter relationship was threatened by Gilligan's incarceration and possible execution. The arrest, conviction, and possibility of seeing one's mother executed could be considered more traumatic for a daughter than marriage. Because Mary remained within her designated "sphere," and maintained an air of feminine

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<sup>200</sup> "Mrs. Gilligan Found Guilty; To Be Hanged"; "Daughter Aids Woman Held as Poisoner," *The New York Tribune*, May 10, 1916; Jane H. Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>201</sup> Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality*, 31.

<sup>202</sup> Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 6, 13–17.

childlike innocence, society may have considered Gilligan's execution as an injustice toward Mary. Thus, gender based "spheres" and "roles" in relation to socially deviant behavior challenged the perceived effectiveness and necessity for capital punishment.

Seemingly preferable to execution, life-long incarceration in a mental asylum meant the mother-daughter bond could be maintained to a certain degree. By situating Mary's and Gilligan's predicament within a "child/mother separation" narrative, a theme readers could easily identify with, newspaper reports about Mary undercut the evil woman theory by humanizing Gilligan. Media attention on Mary reminded readers that Gilligan was a mother who was responsible for her child, and made it harder for readers to support her execution. Sensationalizing the story meant that the story would spread quickly. Sensational media strengthened Blickensderfer's and Fuller's anti-death penalty movement by focusing on a sense of "sympathy" rather than "shock" or "thrill." Murderous women like Gilligan challenged the established concepts of gender and notions of "separate spheres," making it difficult for society to determine an acceptable way to hold such women accountable for their crimes. Life sentences in either prisons or asylums seemed the most acceptable way to punish a woman convicted of murder. As examined the previous chapters, life-sentences, served either in prisons or asylums, permanently removed criminals and/or insane individuals from mainstream society, creating new private spheres that functioned within public arenas. Today thirty-one states still practice capital punishment and it remains a topic of social and political debate. However, during an era focused on reform, journalists and reformers employed the "powerful public tool" of sympathy to garner public support for the anti-death penalty

movement and justify the perceived “need” for separate spheres.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women's Business*, 6.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Newspapers preserved the notorious names of Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan, documented their crimes, and made them legends. Reports about these women demonstrated how lethal ladies challenged the Victorian desire for “rational order.”<sup>204</sup> Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan could not be easily categorized. They did not fit within the prescribed “woman’s sphere” and their cases reflected the nuanced complexities of “public” and “private” social arenas. Criminally insane, murderous women blurred the boundaries of “public” and “private,” masculine and feminine, mad and mentally sound, guilty and innocent. By addressing topics such as gender, crime, mental illness in relation to murderous women, newspapers validated the “necessity” for separate spheres.

Mitchell’s actions instigated larger medical and journalistic inquiries of gender and sexuality, mental illness, masculinity, and criminality. Medical professionals and the public struggled to reconcile Mitchell’s sexual deviance and criminal behavior with common notions of femininity and the established social expectations of her gender. The severity of Mitchell’s mental illness trumped the atrocity of her crime. Due to her mental incompetence, Mitchell was considered guilty, yet, innocent. As a result, Mitchell found herself incarcerated within an asylum. Institutionalization offered a means to ensure the separation of competent and incompetent individuals. As shown through analysis of newspaper reports about Mitchell, the incarceration of criminally insane women contributed to the criminalization of mental illness and the masculinization of crime. By

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<sup>204</sup> Howe, “American Victorianism as Culture,” 522–24.

sensationalizing and endorsing new scientific and medical “knowledge” about mental illness and sexuality, newspapers reinforced the perceived “necessity” for separate spheres.

Media coverage of Toppan’s case demonstrated how medically sanctioned and socially accepted stereotypes affected public perceptions of the mentally ill. Newspaper illustrations inspired by Toppan enhanced written narratives and visually defined social spheres and mental illness. Fraught with stereotypes, visual and written narratives about Toppan correlated madness with crime, perpetuating the idea that the mentally ill were unsafe and should be separated from the general population. Being “bad” or “mad” resulted in similar consequences—removal from the general population. By exploiting readers’ emotions through the application of stereotypes, newspapers encouraged the incarceration of mentally ill individuals, strengthening the notion that society “needed” separate spheres.

Reports about Gilligan’s transgressions and court cases contributed to ongoing discussions on the topics of criminal responsibility, moral agency in regard to mental health, and capital punishment. Moreover, newspaper coverage about Gilligan demonstrated ways in which “sympathy” functioned as powerful tool for the media and reformers.<sup>205</sup> The key to the success of sensationalism *and* reform was “sympathy.” After Gilligan’s initial conviction and sentencing, death-penalty abolitionists promoted their cause through media outlets by telling Gilligan’s story from the view point of her daughter, Mary. Journalists and reformers positioned Mary as an obedient, victimized

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<sup>205</sup> Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness, and Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women’s Business*, 6.

child—a character type with which the public could easily sympathize. And, although Mary was not a “Victorian,” reformers and journalists made her appear as if she exemplified the virtues of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” qualities her mother seemingly lacked. Mary remained in her “sphere,” while Gilligan did not. The ploy worked. Gilligan received a stay of execution, a new trial, and a commuted sentence. She lived out her life in a state hospital.<sup>206</sup> By relying on “sympathy,” journalists and reformers gained public support for the anti-death penalty movement and justified the perceived “need” for separate spheres.

Newspapers serve as a provocative source to examine the stories of murderous women and the topics of gender, crime, mental health, criminal punishment, and the concept of separate spheres. Likewise, the opposite is the true. Murderous women provide an intriguing lens through which to analyze historical media practices. Examination of media representations of murderous women should not cease with the conclusion of this thesis. There are more newspapers to analyze, questions to ask, and stories to tell. Many murderous women from 1890 through 1920 became objects of journalistic, medical, and public curiosity due to their socially deviant behaviors and lethal actions.<sup>207</sup> Certain areas of academic research related to media, crime, and gender have not yet been explored. For instance, the women addressed in this thesis were randomly chosen and each happened to be “white.” As mentioned in the first chapter, the function of race in media representations of murderous women is one area that requires

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<sup>206</sup> Phelps, *The Devil’s Rooming House: The True Story of America’s Deadliest Female Serial Killer*, 239; Larry Fields, “Amy Gilligan Dies-She Killed Five Men but Evaded Chair,” *Sunday Herald*, April 29, 1962.

<sup>207</sup> Not all women accused of murder were found guilty or deemed insane. Most famously, in 1891 a jury acquitted Lizzie Borden of the murders of her father and step-mother. Despite the acquittal, public opinion continued to condemn Borden for crimes she may not have committed. See “Condemned by Public Opinion,” *The Oakes Times*, April 24, 1913.

deeper investigation. Limited access to African-American and other “minority” newspapers printed during the designated time period prevented a thorough examination of media practices through a racial lens. Examining representations of murderous women in African-American newspapers would allow for a cross-racial comparison of turn of the twentieth century journalism practices and address how issues of race affected the development of popular perceptions of crime, mental illness, gender, and separate spheres. Additionally, analyzing stories about lethal ladies from minority populations would allow for a cross-racial comparison of murderous women through a journalistic lens and offer opportunities to examine ways in which race affected media behavior pertaining to the topics of crime, gender, mental health, social spheres, and the processes of punishment. Ultimately, such research would continue to give a voice to historical women who existed on the fringes of society.

Mitchell, Toppan, and Gilligan represent only three cases in which sensationalized stories about murderous women created opportunities for the public to participate in discourses of gender, violence, mental health, and criminal punishment. They did not “conform” to society’s expectations of women. Therefore, they were not considered “normal.” By sensationalizing the actions and trials of murderous women, journalists bolstered socially accepted definitions of “normality.” Furthermore, sensationalized reports about lethal ladies reinforced established notions of gender, mental health, and crime, and substantiated the perceived “need” for separate spheres.

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