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**Intimate Partner Homicide in British Street Literature in the  
Nineteenth Century**

*A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

*in English Literature*

**School of Critical Studies**

**College of Arts and Humanities**

**University of Glasgow**

by

**Aiman Mutlaq O Alshammari**

**July 2025**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) in nineteenth-century British street literature, focusing on how visual and verbal elements converge to construct depictions of domestic murder in broadsides, chapbooks, and other ephemeral cultural productions. It examines how the hybrid form of street literature—combining sensational illustration, visual layout and typography with ballads, trial reports, confessions, and execution accounts—evokes real-life cases of IPH in a direct, raw, and immediate manner while negotiating the formal dissonance and fluidity of the genre in its portrayal of this culturally complex issue. By restoring these neglected texts to scholarly visibility, this thesis highlights the value of street literature as a vital archive of popular responses and public discourse surrounding domestic violence, gender norms, and legal reform in the nineteenth century. The project challenges literary hierarchies that privilege canonical texts by locating broadsides and chapbooks as a dissident, generative and underexplored site of cultural meaning-making around intimate violence.

The thesis is structured around three chapters, each centred on either male- or female-perpetrated IPH and exploring a different mode of killing and its attendant cultural anxieties. The first considers the 1831 case of John Holloway, focusing on dismemberment and the construction of male violence and victim-blaming through the interplay of verbal and visual codes. The second examines Margaret Shuttleworth (1821), a so-called ‘fallen woman’ who killed her husband while drunk, addressing how street literature frames female physical aggression. The third investigates several poisoning cases across the century, arguing that poison is a ‘feminine’ method of murder, entangled with misgivings about medical jurisprudence, female propriety, intimacy, and deceit. Overall, this thesis argues that street literature’s hybrid form allows it to stage intense and contested portrayals of IPH, making visible the tensions surrounding gender, domestic authority and justice in nineteenth-century Britain.

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To my siblings, whose support is the reason I was able to take such strides: your faith in me, constant reassurance, and unwavering help meant more than words can express. To my parents, my guiding stars—thank you for loving me and supporting me throughout this journey. To my three sons—Waleed, Saif, and Fraih—who have grown alongside this thesis: your presence alone made being in a different country bearable, even feel like home. My love for you has always been my greatest motivation. I hope this accomplishment shows you the strength you've helped me find.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the personal trials that shaped this journey. These challenges tested my resolve but also deepened my sense of purpose. I am especially grateful to my counsellor, Stuart Baggott; to the friends who have always stood by me; to the new friends I met along this journey; and to the quiet sources of strength—moments of solitude, reflection, and hope—that carried me through.

This thesis is dedicated to my children, in the hope that it reminds them that even in adversity, perseverance and love can shape something lasting.

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## Introduction

The severity of Lord Palmerston's new law for the punishment of aggravated assaults, does not seem to have operated as a check upon the propensity of the lower classes of London to beat their wives. It would indeed seem time that some medical inquiry into the circumstances should be instituted, and that the physician as well as the magistrate should look into the causes of these sickening phenomena.

—“The Wife-Beating Mania”, *The Leader* 4, no. 192 (26 November 1853).

This 1853 article concerning ‘The Wife-Beating Mania’ from *The Leader* repeats many cultural commonplaces that marked mid-century political and newspaper debates about the nature and causes of ‘aggravated assaults’.<sup>1</sup> According to the article, this crime was perpetrated overwhelmingly by men of the ‘lower classes’ against their wives or partners; it was an urban, even metropolitan phenomenon, where the sheer density, sprawl and anonymity of London life afforded myriad opportunities for men to unleash brutal beatings, largely untroubled by the threat of detection or punishment.<sup>2</sup> What makes this piece remarkable is not how it anticipates the conventional wisdom voiced by many historically focused criminologists and social scientists—that violent crime is, and always has been, a predominantly male action. Instead, it is the notion that the ‘wife-beating mania’ is an urgent question for legal experts, philosophers, magistrates, and clinicians, especially those with insights to share about individual male pathology.<sup>3</sup> This framing signals an important cultural shift

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1. ‘The Wife-Beating Mania’, *The Leader* 4, no. 192 (26 November 1853): 1136–37, ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 27 March 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/wife-beating-mania/docview/4945030/se-2?accountid=14540>.

2. For an examination of violence between working-class men and women in mid-Victorian London, see Nancy Tomes, ‘A “Torrent of Abuse”: Crimes of Violence Between Working-Class Men and Women in London 1840–1875’, *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 328–345, accessed 27 March 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/torrent-abuse-crimes-violence-between-working/docview/1297378863/se-2?accountid=14540>.

3. ‘Male pathology’ in this context refers to the negative or harmful behaviours, attitudes, and psychological tendencies that are commonly associated with men. These may include traits like aggression,

through the nineteenth century in which violent male behaviour, once considered a private or disciplinary matter, becomes a subject of cultural, legal and medical scrutiny.

A sardonic contributor to *The Saturday Review* in 1857 complained that 'wife-beating' was one of the 'old stock-grievances of society' and had 'just been brought before Parliament'.<sup>4</sup> Judging from 'the insouciance of the Chancellor and the Home Secretary on the subject', it was unlikely to 'gain much' from its 'ventilation at Westminster'. 'Wife-beating', according to *The Saturday Review*'s rendering of ministerial attitudes, was such an 'undeniable abomination' that 'if we cannot cure' it, 'we had better not talk about it'.<sup>5</sup> Although the article concludes that wife-beating is better left undiscussed if it cannot be resolved, the fact that it was debated in print media outlets suggests a certain level of public engagement. However, strikingly, this willingness to talk, even if reluctantly,

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dominance, and a lack of emotional expression or empathy, among others. Some scholars and activists argue that the idealisation of certain forms of masculinity, such as the emphasis on physical strength and emotional stoicism, can lead to harmful behaviours and attitudes that contribute to issues like domestic violence, substance abuse, and suicide. See Judith Todd and Arthur C. Bohart, *Foundations of Clinical and Counselling Psychology* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006). While the above claims are considered recent, there were certainly discussions in the nineteenth century about the social and psychological effects of gender norms and expectations on men's mental health and well-being. For example, in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin writes about the impact of male competition on the psychological and physical health of men. He argues that the intense competition for resources and status among men is responsible for the high levels of stress, anxiety, and mental illness observed among males in many societies. See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859). Additionally, some nineteenth-century authors were critical of the rigid gender roles and expectations placed on men and argued that these norms were harmful to men's emotional and psychological well-being. For example, in their 1851 essay 'The Enfranchisement of Women', philosopher John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor argue that the ideal of masculine vigour and stoicism is a source of suffering for men, and that men should be allowed to express their emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of ridicule or ostracism. While the term 'male pathology' was not used in the nineteenth century, there were certainly discussion and critique of the harmful effects of gender expectations on men's mental well-being during this era. See John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, 'The Enfranchisement of Women', *The Westminster Review*, 55 (July 1851): 289–311, accessed 27 March 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/enfranchisement-women/docview/2743487499/se-2?accountid=14540>.

4. 'Wife-beating', *The Saturday Review* 3, no. 81 (16 May 1857): 446, ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 27 March 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/wife-beating/docview/9489236/se-2?accountid=14540>.

5. 'Wife-beating', *The Saturday Review* 3, no. 81 (16 May 1857): 446.

did not extend to another, arguably more disturbing, form of intimate partner violence: spousal murder. While many newspapers reported on wife-killing and husband-killing cases, they rarely framed them as a social issue in the way they did with wife-beating, as will be seen in this thesis. As Bridgit Walsh observes regarding press coverage of domestic murder up until the 1870s, ‘the press coverage of such crimes continued to present domestic murder as an aberration’.<sup>6</sup> This attitude reveals a broader discomfort—perhaps even fear—with confronting the full extent of intimate partner violence (IPV) within the home. Martin J. Wiener notes, ‘[o]ver this era, several broad changes took place in the recorded incidence and treatment of homicide’, among them, ‘public, normally male-on-male, killing apparently was declining markedly, while “private,” domestic or other intimate killing was failing to show clear evidence of diminution’, indicating that intimate violence remained a sustained issue even as broader societal violence diminished.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis examines how nineteenth-century street literature responded obsessively to the call to probe, in granular and often grisly detail, not the ‘sickening phenomena’ of wife-beating *per se*, but its most extreme form: spousal murder—violence that begins, and all too often ends, within the home, the ‘uneasy cauldron of bliss’.<sup>8</sup> Street literature offers a more layered account of intimate partner homicide (IPH) than contemporary press coverage, because it grapples with more difficult questions: who commits such acts—men and women alike—under what circumstances, by what means, and to what ends? These are questions that many canonical novelists, poets, lawmakers, and

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6. Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 38, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 25 May 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1678756>.

7. Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3, accessed 2 March 2025, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=255208&ppg=1>.

8. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14–15; see also Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

politicians—often constrained by editorial convention or caution—feared to broach. As Robert Lewis Collison observes, broadsides were printed in large numbers and guaranteed substantial financial gains to their printers; for instance, James Catnach printed over 250,000 copies about John Thurtell's 1823 case, in which he murdered a male friend over gambling debts, and over a million copies about the 1827 'Red Barn' case, in which William Corder murdered his lover, Maria Marten.<sup>9</sup> The contrast between the number of sales of these publications suggests that narratives centred on IPH held a uniquely powerful appeal for contemporary readers and offered greater commercial value. This thesis offers up one potential reason for this appeal: street literature did not shy away from representing the emotional intensity and moral ambiguity of such violence.

David Stoker defines street literature as:

a modern term used to cover a variety of popular printed matter designed for an unsophisticated audience often distributed by itinerant vendors. It was cheap in price and small in size, usually consisting of a single sheet of paper or part thereof. Publications might be offered as a plain sheet or folded and stitched into a booklet. They could include both printed text and graphic images.<sup>10</sup>

For Stoker, street literature encompasses a wide array of cheaply produced printed materials, including broadsides, ballads, woodcut illustrations, chapbooks, published confessions, pamphlets, catchpennies, biographies of criminal lives, 'penny bloods'/penny dreadfuls, cheap sensational journalism, and other ephemera. Leslie Shepherd claims that 'street literature, in its broadest state, is as old as mankind'.<sup>11</sup> What is particularly fascinating about street literature is its wide variation—not

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9. Robert Lewis Collison, *The Story of Street Literature: Forerunner of the Popular Press* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973), 31-49.

10. David Stoker, 'Street Literature in England at the End of the Long Eighteenth Century', In *Street Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century: Producers, Sellers, Consumers*, edited by David Atkinson and Steve Roud (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 60-98.

11. Leslie Shepard. *The History of Street Literature: The Story of Broadside Ballads, Chapbooks, Proclamations, News-Sheets, Election Bills, Tracts, Pamphlets, Cocks, Catchpennies, and Other Ephemera* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), 37-50.

only in artistic style and production quality, ranging from crude and stark to refined and elaborate, but also in its eye-catching format: it combined visual elements such as woodcut illustrations, typography, framing devices, and page layout, and verbal elements including ballads, trial reports, witness testimonies, final confessions, and background narratives. According to David Atkinson and Steve Roud, this variety also encompassed a notable array of genres. As they remark, 'street literature ranged across fiction and non-fiction, catering for a wide variety of tastes, though presumably individual readers had their own favourite genres'.<sup>12</sup>

Kate Bates argues for the importance of these cultural products, stating:

A critical reading of broadsides provides a portal through which we may capture an insight into the lives and losses of past generations and that this can enable us to recapture the mental attitudes and mores of a nation. Hence, the importance of such ephemera is not to be denied, and increasingly scholars are valuing the social and cultural evidence they provide.<sup>13</sup>

Bates reminds us that street literature offers researchers a rich source of material for investigation.

For our specific topic, street literature provides an opportunity to examine powerful stories that reflect shifting gender norms, changing notions of intimacy, evolving sentencing patterns for serious offences, and the social meanings of domestic brutality. These texts reveal how private life was increasingly drawn into public view through a striking repertoire of visual and verbal codes. The medium of print blurred the boundaries between inside and outside, the concealed and revealed, granting readers intimate access to the domestic sphere, where the most unsettling form of violence occurred: the murder of loved ones.

I focus on the dynamic interplay between street literature's visual and verbal representations and

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12. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), 21, accessed 19 May 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=30750082&ppg=30&c=UERG>.

13. Kate Bates, *Crime, Broadsides and Social Change, 1800-1850* (London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

how these depictions reveal its complex, raw, fluid, and often dissonant nature across different cases and within the portrayal of the same case, sometimes even within a single text. These varied formats suggest a dynamic representational field that benefits from close, contextually grounded analysis. It is important to acknowledge that while some broadsides featured images specially commissioned or adapted for the specific case, others employed pre-printed woodcut illustrations that were often reused across different publications.<sup>14</sup> Although this practice complicates assumptions about direct case specificity, it does not diminish the interpretive value of the images. Even when recycled, these woodcuts acquired new meanings through their captions, placement, and juxtaposition with accompanying text. The recurrence of familiar visual motifs—such as scaffold scenes or penitential gestures—thus becomes integral to understanding how readers encountered and interpreted narratives of crime and punishment.

To provide an example, let us consider the representation of Patrick Carroll's case in street literature, who murdered Elizabeth Browning after she rejected his advances to court her on 27 April 1835. Regarding this case, two broadsides are worth examining.<sup>15</sup> At first glance, these cultural products appear identical—they share the same title, publisher, ballads, and prose sections titled "The Trial" and "The Execution". However, while there are slight variations in the prose, the most noticeable difference is that one broadside features three illustrations and includes an additional

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14. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Street Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century: Producers, Sellers, Consumers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 2, accessed 10 February 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=5061824>.

15. "The Trial of Patrick Carroll; Patrick Carroll's Lamentation; with an Account of His Execution in Front of the Jail at Maidstone, Kent, for The Wilful Murder of Mrs Browning", broadside with three illustrations (London: Smeeton, 1835), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 20 May 2025, [https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990069840110203941\\_HLSLIBR:1088108](https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990069840110203941_HLSLIBR:1088108); and "The Trial of Patrick Carroll; Patrick Carroll's Lamentation; with an Account of His Execution in Front of the Jail at Maidstone, Kent, for The Wilful Murder of Mrs Browning", broadside with four illustrations (London: Smeeton, 1835), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 20 May 2025, [https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990069840110203941\\_HLSLIBR:912670](https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990069840110203941_HLSLIBR:912670).

prose section titled ‘Confession’, whereas the other contains four illustrations, with the fourth image replacing the ‘Confession’ section. A seemingly minor change underscores that every detail contributes to the representation of the crime and can alter its emotional impact. This plays out in the visual variation between the two versions (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. 'The Trial of Patrick Carroll' broadside, featuring three illustrations.

The changes between Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate a notable shift in how the crime narrative is presented visually and textually. In Figure 1, the first illustration, which is the central one in terms of size and space, is an example of Patrick Carroll's execution. The execution was on top of a building surrounded by guards or police officers. This dominant image is accompanied by two smaller illustrations: one of the victim, Elizabeth Browning, and the other of her tombstone. Below the main image, to the right, is a prose section titled 'Confession', in which Carroll acknowledges his guilt: 'I acknowledge the justice of my sentence. I admit that I have deserved to forfeit my life to the offended laws for having shed another's blood', expresses remorse, and attributes his crime to ungovernable passion inflamed by drink. This format prioritises the judicial resolution and execution, while offering a morally didactic narrative of repentance and caution.



Figure 2. 'The Trial of Patrick Carroll' broadside, featuring four illustrations.

By contrast, Figure 2 rearranges the visual hierarchy and reframes the emotional centre of the broadside. The central image is no longer the execution but a dramatic depiction of the murder itself: Elizabeth Browning, bleeding from the throat, staggers backwards as Patrick Carroll lunges at her with a dagger in one hand, restraining her with the other. This scene is now the most visually prominent, inviting the viewer to witness the violence as it unfolds. The 'Confession' text has been entirely removed. In its place is a smaller execution illustration, which has been relocated to the

bottom of the page, staged before a large crowd composed mainly of women and young girls. These shifts are deeply telling. Removing the written confession from Figure 2 strips away the male offender's voice of remorse and explanation and elevates the graphic representation of the crime. The violence becomes immediate and visceral, not mediated by the criminal's attempt at moral rehabilitation. At the same time, replacing the confession with a smaller, more public execution scene reframes the execution itself: not as a solemn, institutional act of justice (as in Figure 1), but as a grisly spectacle witnessed by the public, mainly women, who in this version are positioned as both audience members and implicit moral subjects. This restructuring points to an intentional shift. Where Figure 1 encourages reflection on punishment, repentance, and moral instruction, Figure 2 centres on the crime's brutality, the female victim's vulnerability, and the public visibility of justice. It moves from a relatively contained narrative of crime and redemption to one of public horror and emotional immersion.

The illustrator's decision to present the execution in this way in Figure 2 validates two crucial claims. The first aligns with literary scholar Barry Faulk's description of the function of public execution:

The public execution was high drama; it was punishment as 'spectacle', and the parallels between execution and the theatre did not go unnoticed. [...] As with all good theatre, the audience, in this case, the crowd around the scaffold, played an essential role. [...] The main character was the people, whose natural and immediate presence was required for the performance.<sup>16</sup>

The other is provided by Michel Foucault, who claims that 'the condemned man, carried in procession, exhibited, humiliated, with the horror of his crime, recalled in innumerable ways, was offered to the insults, sometimes to the attacks of the spectators. The vengeance of the people was

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16. Barry Faulk, 'The Public Execution: Urban Rhetoric and Victorian Crowds', in *Executions and the British Experience from the 17th to the 20th Century: A Collection of Essays*, edited by William B. Thesing (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 78-79.

called upon to become an unobtrusive part of the vengeance of the sovereign'.<sup>17</sup> So, an illustrator's decision to present us with an audience dominated by women throws into sharper relief the notion of an abused and outraged social group taking 'vengeance' on a man who has spilt the blood of one of their number. The rendering of the Patrick Carroll case in the two broadsides provides a compelling example of how even minor verbal-visual modifications can generate markedly different interpretations. This example highlights the importance of examining, in searching detail, the artistic style and variations of street literature.

Literary scholars have been relatively slow to scrutinise these cultural artefacts with the same level of critical rigour, which bears out Ellen L. O'Brien's observation that

Scholars [...] seem reluctant to espouse working-class contributions to and influence in Victorian aesthetics and literature. The sheer volume of this literary production and its position in a marketplace of cheap goods (broadsides sold for a halfpenny or a penny) combined with its relationship to working-class production and consumption have contributed to a long-standing scholarly dismissal of the aesthetic sophistication of these texts.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, O'Brien asserts that 'the poetic and political significance of street balladry [...] has been lost within a long history of critical dismissals'.<sup>19</sup> While earlier scholars have often dismissed street literature for its scandalous and lowbrow appeal, commentators such as O'Brien, Kate Bates, Steve Roud, and David Atkinson have affirmed its value as an expressive mode that deserves recognition as a core part of popular culture. However, even within this growing body of scholarship, the dynamic interplay between street literature's visual and verbal components remains underexplored. My work addresses this gap by appraising how these two elements communicate with and shape one

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17. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979), 29.

18. Ellen L. O'Brien, ‘“The Most Beautiful Murder”: The Transgressive Aesthetics of Murder in Victorian Street Ballads’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (1) (2000): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1060150300281023>.

19. Ellen L. O'Brien, *Crime in Verse: The Poetics of Murder in the Victorian Era* (Columbus, Ohio: State University Press, 2008), 30-31.

another, working together to create a more panoramic and emotionally resonant picture of IPH in nineteenth-century Britain.

My concern with street literature's depiction of IPH—more specifically, spousal murder—stems from the fact that this period witnessed a staggering rise in domestic abuse and homicide cases, alongside increasingly stringent legal measures aimed at curbing such violence. In this time frame, several ordinances were introduced that outlawed the battery of wives and children. The Offences Against the Person Act in 1828 and the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 enabled women to solicit custody of their children under the age of seven, while the 1853 Criminal Procedure Act, also called the Act for the Better Prevention of Aggravated Assault upon Women and Children, set a clear limit for what was tolerable by way of family chastisement.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Female Temporary Home Act of 1852 afforded safe sites for victims to escape their violent husbands.<sup>21</sup> The 1857 Divorce Act, the 1882 Married Women's Property Act, and the 1884 founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children are landmarks in women's rights and child protection. In England and Wales, the 1857 Divorce Act made divorce more accessible for both men and women, allowing women to apply for divorce on the grounds of adultery, albeit with some inequalities remaining. The Married Women's Property Act of 1882 granted married women the right to own and control property in their name, apart from their husbands, resulting in increased financial independence.<sup>22</sup> Given these legal reforms, treating how street literature negotiated the shifting attitudes toward women's rights

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20. Lisa A. Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 20, 113, 16, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 25 May 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1773366>.

21. Caroline Norton, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854), accessed 21 May 2025, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/norton/elfw/elfw.html>.

22. Surridge, *Bleak Houses*, 20, 200.

and domestic violence in nineteenth-century society becomes especially absorbing for what it reveals about the interplay between law, culture, and popular representation.

My study begins around 1821, allowing for a comparison of the cultural landscape before and after the Offences Against the Person Act of 1828. This Act is vital because it was the first concrete step towards controlling and limiting instances of systematic spousal abuse and murder. This Act allowed (at least in principle) victims of brutal assault to take legal action against their victimisers. Thus, it is considered by many legal historians to be one of the most notable measures against spousal battery in English political history.<sup>23</sup> The period under scrutiny here marks the first time in English history that penalties regarding marital abuse were vigorously debated and delineated in Parliament, and institutions were created to help and shelter its victims.<sup>24</sup> As such, we can ponder in what ways street literature responded to changing legal sanctions and the social phenomena which shaped these sanctions.<sup>25</sup>

It is crucial to note that in nineteenth-century British legal discourse, the term 'marital cruelty' did not serve as a general descriptor for what we now understand as IPV. Instead, it referred to a particular and narrowly applied legal ground for judicial separation, available only under strict conditions and primarily before the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the more informal and popularly used term 'wife-beating' appeared frequently in contemporary

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23. Surridge, *Bleak Houses*, 16.

24. Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 2016).

25. For example, Maeve E. Doggett, in *Marriage, Wife-Beating, and the Law in Victorian England*, argues that the rise of Evangelicalism and the spread of Enlightenment philosophy influenced the legal system's approach to IPV, leading to adjustments in the law that reflected broader cultural shifts towards non-violence and greater protections for women. See Maeve E. Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating, and the Law in Victorian England* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

26. Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 138.

newspapers, such as the opening article of *The Leader* in 1853.<sup>27</sup> However, both ‘marital cruelty’ and ‘wife-beating’ fall short of capturing the full complexity and scope of domestic violence as recognised in current UK legal definitions and policy frameworks. These terms focused mainly on physical abuse within heterosexual marriages and were embedded in gendered assumptions that cast men as perpetrators and women as victims. As such, they excluded the possibility of men as victims, women as aggressors, and forms of non-physical abuse, such as emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial violence. They also ignored violence occurring in non-marital intimate relationships, which are now considered a fundamental component of IPV. Most critically for this thesis, these historical terms made no provision for homicide within intimate partnerships. In response to such limitations, recent scholars have sought to establish a more precise terminology. As Kathleen J. Ferraro notes in ‘The Dance of Dependency’, the term ‘domestic violence’ emerged in the early 1970s as a gender-neutral, modern category designed to encompass both physical and psychological abuse between adult intimate partners, while occasionally extending to broader familial or child abuse.<sup>28</sup> Mindful of Ferraro’s study, Garcia and McManimon argue that the more precise term for domestic abuse is ‘intimate partner violence’, since terms such as ‘family abuse’ can be misleading: they may include all family members (wives, husbands, children, siblings, parents, or grandparents) while excluding

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27. Anna Clark, ‘Domesticity and the Problem of Wife-Beating in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Working-Class Culture, Law and Politics’, in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950: Gender and Class*, ed. Shani D’Cruze (London: Routledge, 2000), 27–40, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 22 May 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1757021>; and ‘Humanity or Justice? Wife-beating and the Law in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* Ed. Carol Smart (London: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 187–206, accessed 22 May 2025, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/reader/download/5327c171-fed4-43ff-bc75-bb7c22612f18/chapter/pdf?context=ubx>.

28. Kathleen J. Ferraro, ‘The Dance of Dependency: A Genealogy of Domestic Violence Discourse’, *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb01036.x>.

lovers, ex-partners, and former spouses.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, terms such as domestic murder or spousal murder are inexact: the former fails to distinguish intimate partner killings from other familial homicides, while the latter excludes non-marital romantic partners, such as lovers or ex-lovers. To address this conceptual gap, recent criticism has increasingly adopted the term IPH, which refers explicitly to ‘the killing of a person by their current or former intimate partner’, regardless of marital status or gender.<sup>30</sup> Thus, this thesis follows the scholarly lead in the adoption of the term IPH, which allows for a more rigorous and nuanced analysis of the gendered dynamics of violence within intimate relationships, both historically and today.

### The Critical Tradition

IPH is rarely the primary focus of literary scholarship and tends to appear alongside depictions of other crimes across genres. As such, before narrowing down to IPH specifically, it is helpful to examine how crime and murder have been represented more broadly across these varied literary forms to gain a better understanding of the wider narrative and cultural frameworks within which IPH is situated. The ‘year zero’ of major early research on nineteenth-century crime coincides with the publication of Richard D. Altick’s lively, cross-genre study *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (1970).<sup>31</sup> Altick’s historical canvas—from the 1820s to the turn of the twentieth century—affords an interdisciplinary exploration of crime and its representation in Victorian England. It covers a diverse range of genres and media—from narrative prose fiction and drama to illustrations and criminal trial reports—and extends to popular and ephemeral forms, including broadsides and penny dreadfuls.

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29. Vanessa Garcia and Patrick McManimon, in *Gendered Justice: Intimate Partner Violence and the Criminal Justice System* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 20-23.

30. Jasmine Chopra et al., ‘Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Homicide in England and Wales’, *Liverpool John Moores University*, 2021, accessed 22 May 2025, <http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/16172/>.

31. Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (London: J. M. Dent, 1970).

Altick focuses on how murder and crime were evoked and understood within Victorian culture, assessing the social and cultural fabric of the period. He reveals how narratives of crime, particularly murder, were woven into the fabric of broader Victorian social history. While Altick includes street literature within his cultural and social framework, his approach situates these materials in context rather than providing detailed literary or visual analysis focused specifically on street literature. He also pays no attention to IPH. Rather, his project emphasises the connections between popular culture, legal processes, and public perceptions of criminality during the nineteenth century. In Altick's view, these narratives reveal a 'crimson thread that runs through the fabric of Victorian social history'.<sup>32</sup>

Subsequent scholarship has extended Altick's interest in murder to scrutinise issues of gender and criminal responsibility, as seen in Patrick Wilson's *Murderess: A Study of the Women Executed in Britain since 1843* (1971), Mary Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (1977), and Malcolm Feeley and Deborah Little's article 'The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912'.<sup>33</sup> However, their research variously concerns the treatment of female offenders. They explore how women who committed serious crimes—particularly murder—were perceived, prosecuted, and represented, often highlighting the tension between their actions and dominant ideals of femininity. Importantly, these studies do not engage with narrative prose fiction; Wilson and Hartman analyse real-life cases, while Feeley and Little rely on legal records and statistical data. By centring on the figure of the

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32. Altick, *Victorian Studies*, 9-10.

33. Patrick Wilson, *Murderess: A Study of the Women Executed in Britain since 1843* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971); Mary Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (London: Robson Books, 1977); also Malcolm Feeley and Deborah Little, 'The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912', *Law and Society Review* 25 (1991): 719.

murderess and excluding male perpetrators and fictional or popular cultural representations, these works offer an incomplete account—one that my project addresses and corrects by probing how both men and women were portrayed in visual and verbal depictions of intimate partner homicide. Lucia Zedner, in *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (1991), provides a detailed legal and institutional history of how female offenders were treated in the nineteenth-century British justice system, arguing that gendered assumptions influenced prosecution and sentencing.<sup>34</sup> She contends that criminal women at the time were often reclassified from ‘not bad to mad’ and transferred from jail to asylum.<sup>35</sup> Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) provides a revealing fictional commentary on these shifts, particularly through its depiction of female incarceration, mistaken identity, and questions of credibility and madness. Judith Knelman’s feminist thesis, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (1998), scrutinises the nineteenth-century murderer across a broad spectrum of cases—including infanticide, elder murder, servant-perpetrated killings, multiple murders, love-rival conflicts, and intimate partner homicide—while also drawing attention to overlooked factors such as class and age. She focuses on how Victorian newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, and fiction gave women ‘bad press’ in murder cases.<sup>36</sup> Knelman argues that ‘[t]he press tended to make women who killed ugly, “masculine”, old-looking, and, in general, inhuman’<sup>37</sup> and that murders committed by women were even more sensationalised than those committed by men,

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34. Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1991; online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 October 2023), accessed 17 May 2025, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/oso/9780198202646.001.0001>.

35. Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 264.

36. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, i, a foundational study of women and ordinary crime within the broader context of the English criminal process.

37. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 20.

with the press and public fascinated by these acts deemed ‘most unnatural’ of the fairer sex.<sup>38</sup>

Despite this sensationalism, Knelman’s research shows that between 1855 and 1874, ‘about twice as many men as women were tried for murder, though a much smaller proportion of women were executed’.<sup>39</sup> Although women accounted for nearly one-third of those convicted of murder, their crimes received an amplified cultural focus, reflecting a heightened societal fascination with female violence.<sup>40</sup> My own research narrows the focus to intimate partner homicide in street literature, while also extending the analysis to include both male and female perpetrators. This refocusing enables a more precise exploration of how gender shaped cultural meanings in cases of intimate partner homicide, revealing the ways in which street literature constructed, reinforced, or at times challenged prevailing social attitudes towards domestic violence.

For a counterpart, Wiener’s *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (2004) offers a key critical intervention.<sup>41</sup> Wiener traces the historical relationship between male violence—especially homicide—and masculinity, arguing that in nineteenth-century Britain, criminal justice and cultural norms worked together to interpret and reshape violent male behaviour. He treats homicide as a gendered act rooted in male propensities and explores how Victorian society sought to regulate such violence through legal, social, and cultural mechanisms. While Wiener briefly references street literature such as broadsides, he does so as part of a broader cultural enquiry. He uses ephemeral cultural production to illustrate public reactions to crime—especially executions—as spectacles of moral instruction. However, he does not conduct close visual or verbal readings of

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38. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, i.

39. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 15.

40. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 15.

41. Wiener, *Men of Blood*.

such materials. His primary focus remains on legal discourse and institutional responses rather than on the popular and material forms of street literature.<sup>42</sup>

While these studies consider one gender, other works have interpreted crimes committed by both men and women. Beth Kalikoff's *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (1986) ponders depictions of various types of fictional murder across various literary modes from 1830 to the early 1900s.<sup>43</sup> However, her core focus is sensation novels, Gothic fiction, and melodrama, with limited attention to nonfictional representations of real-life crime. Lisa Rodensky's *The Crime in Mind* (2003) learns lessons from the 'blind spots' of Kalikoff's argument and pays more scrupulous attention to the overlap between literary, medico-scientific and legal documents.<sup>44</sup> However, her primary texts are predominantly canonical and frequently discussed mimetic-realist works, such as *Oliver Twist*, *Adam Bede*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, as well as the published writings of James Fitzjames Stephen, a formidably prolific commentator on the vagaries of Victorian criminal law.<sup>45</sup> Rodensky demonstrates—often with emphatic assurance—how major nineteenth-century novelists capture and articulate the criminal's thought process and how this might overturn readerly perceptions of public and private laws. On the other hand, Marlene Tromp's *The Private Rod: Marital Violence*,

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42. For broader cultural and domestic contexts of Victorian masculinity and middle-class identity, see John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). These works complement Wiener's analysis by exploring constructions of masculinity and social status within the home and material culture.

43. Beth Kalikoff, *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986).

44. Lisa Rodensky, *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2003).

45. K. J. M. Smith, 'Stephen, Sir James Fitzjames, First Baronet (1829–1894), Judge and Writer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26375>.

*Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (2000) provides a significant intervention by treating nineteenth-century crime narratives not as mere sensationalism but as texts deeply attuned to the concealed violence within Victorian domestic spaces.<sup>46</sup> Tromp contends that sensation novels reveal aspects of intimate partner violence and social realities often excluded from sober realist fiction, highlighting the intersection of class, gender, and domestic power. Her analysis of works by Dickens, Collins, and Eliot shows how marital violence was framed within middle-class notions of privacy and propriety, challenging the idea that such violence was confined to the working classes. Tromp's emphasis on the essential role of literary sensationalism in representing hidden domestic violence offers valuable insight into the narrative strategies of street literature. She claims:

Because the same social limitations, by virtue of their definition, did not apply to sensation fiction—it was expected to be sensational—and because it was regulated by different standards of propriety for its publication and sale, it became the site of a discourse that offered an alternative way of perceiving gendered relationships and the violence that might lay at their core.<sup>47</sup>

Lisa Surridge's *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (2008) extends this critical conversation to highly esteemed novels by Charles Dickens and Anne Brontë.<sup>48</sup> Her project examines IPV primarily within the realm of canonical Victorian literary fiction, highlighting how these texts engage with social and cultural attitudes toward marital violence. Her study explores a wide array of themes, including the public visibility of private violence, gendered power dynamics, legal and societal reactions to abuse, and the evolving literary portrayal of marital violence across different narrative forms.

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46. Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

47. Tromp, *The Private Rod*, 10.

48. Lisa Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 25 May 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1773366>.

While the preceding studies have shed valuable light on gendered violence in literary representations of murder, they often overlook, elide or marginalise the rich and revealing archive of nineteenth-century street literature. My study, in contrast, puts these cultural materials centre stage and contributes to a modest but carefully researched cluster of monographs and peer-reviewed essays that trace the history and significance of street literature in shaping nineteenth-century popular culture. These sources offer a judicious and multifaceted perspective on how nineteenth-century street literature reflected and contributed to social and political change. Among the key interventions are Leslie Shepard's seminal works: *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (1962), *The History of Street Literature* (1973), and *The Broadside Ballad* (1978).<sup>49</sup> Shepard traces the development of various forms of ephemeral print from their roots in early modern England through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, highlighting their evolving production, distribution, and cultural significance. His work reveals how street literature adapted to changing social and technological contexts. In comparison, Claude M. Simpson's *The British Broadside Ballad and its Music* (1966) probes this genre's musical styles, social context and meanings.<sup>50</sup> Robert Lewis Collison's *The Story of Street Literature: Forerunner of the Popular Press* (1973) explores how cheap printed materials like broadsides, chapbooks, ballads, and other ephemera laid the groundwork for the rise of the modern popular press.<sup>51</sup> The book sheds light on the historical development, content, distribution methods, and readership of street literature, arguing that these early modes of mass communication played a

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49. Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (London: H. Jenkins, 1962); *The History of Street Literature: The Story of Broadside Ballads, Chapbooks, Proclamations, News-Sheets, Election Bills, Tracts, Pamphlets, Cocks, Catchpennies, and Other Ephemera* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973); *The Broadside Ballad: The Development of the Street Ballad from Traditional Song to Popular Newspaper* (Hatboro, PA: Legacy Books, 1978).

50. Claude Mitchell Simpson, *The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966).

51. Collison, *The Story of Street Literature*.

foundational role in shaping public discourse and popular culture before the expansion of newspapers and periodicals. Victor E. Neuburg, in *Popular Literature: A History and Guide from the Beginning of Printing to the Year 1897* (1977), offers a foundational study of popular print culture—including street literature—and its role in understanding the beliefs and mentalities of the British labouring classes.<sup>52</sup> He argues that materials often dismissed as ephemeral or lowbrow warrant serious scholarly attention, as they reflect how ‘relatively unlettered members of society [...] thought and felt’.<sup>53</sup> Neuburg further suggests that ‘popular literature can be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure. Such a reader may, of course, come from any class in society, although the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor – and, by the end of the eighteenth century, also to children’.<sup>54</sup> Louis James’ *Print and the People 1819-1951* (1976) is a pioneering work in popular print culture. It explores how printed materials—such as broadsides, chapbooks, penny papers, and cheap literature—reached, reflected, and shaped the lives of labouring-class and lower-middle-class readers in Britain at the time.<sup>55</sup> Patricia Anderson’s *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* (1991) focuses on the explosion of visual print culture between 1790 and 1860, including woodcuts, engravings, etchings, and especially illustrated broadsides, ballads, and penny prints.<sup>56</sup> She contends that this growing market of cheap, mass-produced images transformed labouring-class identity, widespread literacy, and public discourse. More recently, Patricia Fumerton’s *The Broadside Ballad in Early Modern England: Moving*

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52. Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide from the Beginning of Printing to the Year 1897* (London: Woburn Press, 1977), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315030302>.

53. Neuburg, *Popular Literature*, 11.

54. Neuburg, *Popular Literature*, 12.

55. Louis James, *Print and the People, 1819–1951* (United Kingdom: A. Lane, 1976).

56. Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

*Media, Tactical Publics* (2021) supplies a compelling account of the broadside ballad as a multimodal and affective media form. Her chief concern is with the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, considering how ballads functioned as moving media that created tactical publics through performance, circulation, and material form.<sup>57</sup> David Atkinson and Steve Roud have made substantial contributions to the study of street literature across long historical periods, with two of their studies focusing on nineteenth-century street literature. In *Street Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century: Producers, Sellers, Consumers* (2017), they probe the social, economic, and cultural contexts surrounding the production and dissemination of ephemeral print, exploring the lives and practices of those involved in the trade.<sup>58</sup> This work is complemented by their other book, *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America* (2014).<sup>59</sup> Like Simpson's enterprise, this book scrutinises the performative and oral aspects of street literature, investigating its dynamic relationship with print. Their edited volume *Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (2023) contextualises similar themes in an earlier period, illuminating continuities and transformations in popular print culture from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup>

Among the studies that investigate the representation of crime in street literature are the works of Thomas Gretton and Kate Bates. In *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints 1800–1860* (1980), Gretton explores the impact of cheaply produced catchpenny prints on public opinion and

57. Patricia Fumerton, *The Broadside Ballad in Early Modern England: Moving Media, Tactical Publics* (United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

58. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, *Street Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century: Producers, Sellers, Consumers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

59. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America: The Interface Between Print and Oral Traditions* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2014).

60. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), accessed May 19, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=30750082&ppg=30&c=UERG>.

moral values in early nineteenth-century England.<sup>61</sup> In the introduction, he highlights how these visually striking and widely circulated prints served as entertainment and moral instruction, shaping perceptions of crime, punishment, and social norms. However, his analysis of such artefacts remains limited. Gretton briefly describes the prints and publishes a collection for readers to view, but he does not conduct a close reading of their content or visual design. Arguably, one of the most eye-catching studies published in the last decade, Kate Bates's *Crime, Broadsides and Social Change, 1800–1850*, provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and social contexts in which crime broadsides were produced and consumed.<sup>62</sup> Bates challenges the idea that broadsides were simply sensationalist entertainment for the masses, arguing instead that they moulded public perceptions of the legal system and its approach to violent offenders. Bates demonstrates how broadsides contributed to visions of a criminal underworld in the popular imaginary, helping to foster a moral panic around certain types of crime. In addition, Bates stresses the centrality of interdisciplinary approaches when dealing with broadsides and crime. By drawing on investigative methodologies from history, literature, sociology, and cultural studies, she confronts and exposes the shortcomings of previous scholarship by parsing the discourses regarding criminality, law, punishment, and morality in a sample of 650 early-nineteenth-century broadsides. Her focus is twofold: challenging academic assumptions that have dominated the historiography of broadsides and conducting a social-scientific analysis to construe the sheets' perspectives on urgent contemporary issues rather than appraising them as literary texts.

Two critical studies have had a decisive impact on my scholarly approach to street literature in

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61. Thomas Gretton, *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints, 1800–1860* (London: British Museum Publications, 1980), Internet Archive, accessed 25 May 2025, <https://archive.org/details/murdersmoralitie0000unse>.

62. Kate Bates, *Crime, Broadsides and Social Change, 1800–1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2020).

this thesis. The first is Ellen O'Brien's chapter 'Murder, Execution, and the Criminal Classes' in *Crime in Verse: The Poetics of Murder in the Victorian Era*. O'Brien employs a multifaceted methodology that involves close reading, historical context, and comparative analysis to investigate crime and murder in Victorian poetry. O'Brien pays close attention to the poetic techniques used in the crime ballads of the broadsides, such as rhyme, meter, and figurations. By gauging these aesthetic elements, O'Brien uncovers how broadside ballads exploit poetic language to convey complex ideas and emotions related to gendered subjectivity and transgressive behaviour. Her exploration of the perceptions of the criminal classes sheds light on the societal attitudes and prejudices that shaped public opinion regarding crime and punishment. Her account of moral pretexts and criminal politics affords valuable insights into the complex dynamics between law enforcement, the justice system, and the public during the Victorian era. Additionally, O'Brien's discussion of the role of public executions highlights the performative nature of punishment and its function as both a deterrent and a lurid public spectacle. The aesthetic of 'astonishment', as she describes it, captures the public's fascination with the act of murder and crime scenes, which were often sensationalised and romanticised in the popular press. Expanding upon O'Brien's project, which centres on the verse component of street literature, my research encompasses prose, verse and visual elements, offering a more comprehensive view of illustrations, page design, and typography.

The second study that has enriched my thinking engages directly with domestic murder: Bridget Walsh's *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (2014).<sup>63</sup> Walsh assesses how domestic murder—particularly cases involving women and familial relationships—was portrayed in nineteenth-century anglophone literature and culture. Drawing on an ambitious array of sources, including sensation fiction, newspaper accounts, courtroom

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63. Walsh, *Domestic Murder*.

narratives, and popular and canonical three-decker novels, Walsh explores themes such as moral panic, gendered criminality, and the blending of fact and fiction in representations of crime. Notably, she devotes a chapter to street literature titled ““The Demon in the Dock”: Domestic Murder in Street Literature and the Newspaper Press’. In this chapter, Walsh analyses broadsides, ballads, and press reports to show how these cheap and widely circulated forms sensationalised domestic crimes, particularly those involving women, and influenced public perceptions of gender roles and morality. Walsh combines verbal and visual analysis—attending closely to both the language and illustrations of broadsides—to demonstrate how such representations challenged hegemonic narratives of femininity, respectability, and the sanctity of the Victorian home. However, while her study is rich in scope, her treatment of the visual material engages only briefly with how street literature’s images and text interact to construct meaning. This gap invites further investigation into its visual rhetoric, audience reception, and ideological function as a hybrid and performative mode.

As this brief survey of the research field demonstrates, published secondary sources approach street literature in different ways. Some adopt a book history or print culture lens, tracing its origins, material production, modes of publication, circulation, readership, and classification. These studies often construe street literature as a historical artefact, attending to its material characteristics and commercial context more than to its vivid literary content. Others use it primarily as a source of social information or statistical data, drawing on it to reveal patterns of readership, public morality, or perceptions of crime. Several titles focus more directly on IPV rather than IPH. Even when IPH is addressed, studies are often restricted to one gender or lack rigorous literary and visual analysis, instead treating the material solely as historical evidence or cultural curio without engaging its representational strategies. Only a few works, such as those by Walsh and O’Brien, acknowledge the literary significance of these texts, though each of their enquiries is limited to a single chapter within

a broader monograph. My research extends previous scholarship by offering an original analysis of the dynamic interaction between visual and verbal facets in nineteenth-century British street literature, with a specific focus on the gendered representation of IPH. Interpreting this dynamic reveals a flexible, multidimensional, and often dissonant view of IPH—one that more traditional, mainstream genres and middlebrow press tend not to capture.

## Exploring the Archives

Street literature primary texts are often difficult to access due to their fragile physical condition, rarity, or location. Notable advances in technology, profound shifts in research methodology, and growing academic interest in early modern broadsides have had a transformative impact on the research field, with a striking array of free online databases now available. My study relies on several vital archives, which include a wealth of primary materials on IPH cases in Britain during the nineteenth century. The first, the *Broadside Ballads Online* archive, maintained by the Bodleian Libraries, has proven an essential resource for studying broadsides from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries.<sup>64</sup> The archive provides high-quality digital images and transcriptions of printed ballads, including broadsides, permitting thorough scrutiny of a primary text's visual and textual aspects. *The Word on the Street* archive, held by the National Library of Scotland, is explicitly focused on Scottish broadsides from 1650 to 1910.<sup>65</sup> The archive comprises over 1,800 broadsides, covering topics such as crime, politics, and love. Each broadside included in this resource includes a cogent commentary, and most also have a complete transcription of the source text, plus a downloadable

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64. *Broadside Ballads Online*, Bodleian Libraries, accessed 26 February 2024, <https://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

65. *The Word on the Street*, National Library of Scotland, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/>.

PDF facsimile. *English Crime and Execution Broadsides* archive, held by Harvard Library, boasts a collection of broadsides related to crime and punishment in England and North America from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> The archive offers insight into public attitudes toward criminal justice and the death penalty and includes transcripts of the broadsides, which can help researchers study their formal-stylistic features. *The History of Crime and Punishment in Britain, 1790-1870* archive, held by the University of Glasgow Library, is a modest resource that concerns British crime and punishment across the long nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> The library provides access to high-quality digital images of the materials, along with background information on their historical context. The database includes full-text searching and browsing capabilities—a helpful tool in identifying patterns and trends in the production and consumption of popular culture. *English Broadside Ballad Archive* (EBBA) is a digital collection of broadside ballads (1700-1900).<sup>68</sup> The English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, maintains this online archive that is freely accessible. It contains over 4,000 ballads, which can be searched and viewed online. ProQuest Periodicals Archive Online – Pamphlets & Ephemeral Works is a digital collection of rare and fragile nineteenth- and early twentieth-century materials, including broadsides, trial reports, and other forms of street literature and ephemera.<sup>69</sup> Finally, the Internet Archive offers a vast digital library of public domain materials, including chapbooks and other ephemeral print related to real-life IPH, medical

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66. *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides>.

67. *The History of Crime and Punishment in Britain 1790–1870*, University of Glasgow Library, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/teach/hang/text.html>.

68. *English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA)*, University of California, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/>.

69. ProQuest Periodicals Archive Online: Pamphlets and Ephemeral Works, accessed 8 June 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/pao>.

jurisprudence, and crime reporting.<sup>70</sup> Its searchable database provides access to rare and often overlooked publications, such as trial pamphlets, sensationalist crime narratives, and early forensic literature, making it an indispensable supplementary resource for uncovering lesser-known voices and narratives in the period's cultural imaginary of crime. Likewise, *The British Newspaper Archive* and ProQuest Historical Periodical provide extensive access to contemporaneous news coverage and commentary, enabling detailed scrutiny of how violent crime—particularly domestic violence—was reported and received by different reading constituencies in the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup>

Through my extensive investigation of these online resources, I have pinpointed my primary source texts. I have used advanced search engines with a specific date range from 1800 to 1890 and IPH-related keywords, such as 'husband', 'wife', 'lover', 'jealousy', 'infidelity', 'abuse', 'wife-killing', 'husband-killing', 'domestic murder', and 'murder'. Although I have tried to identify all relevant primary materials in these archives, it is essential to note that some materials may have been overlooked due to incomplete records, search engine limitations, or obscure terminology. Nevertheless, the sheer breadth and depth of the collected materials provide remarkable detail on IPH depictions in street literature and their wider implications for shaping and reflecting societal perceptions. Additionally, they shed light on the evolving sentencing patterns for these types of offences and underscore the gender-based power imbalances that serve as the foundation for such acts of aggression. At the same time, these primary sources reveal recurring topics and historical patterns related to IPH, in addition to unique individual findings that influenced the micro-historical focus of my central chapters.

Probing the sheer abundance of nineteenth-century street literature in these archives dealing with

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70. Internet Archive, accessed 24 May 2025, <https://archive.org/>.

71. *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 27 May 2025, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>; ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 27 May 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/>.

cases of IPH reveals multiple variations in gender, methods of killing, motivations—including unstable marriages, romantic affairs, or financial strain—as well as in the ages and social backgrounds of those involved. These cases span Britain from as early as 1800 to the end of the century. The selection of case studies for this thesis, therefore, required scrupulous narrowing. I chose cases that were extensively covered in broadsides and chapbooks, involved perpetrators of both genders, and diverse modes of killing—premeditated physical violence, impulsive acts under intoxication, and clandestine poisoning—while also reflecting both temporal and regional variation across Britain. This variation is intentional, as it enables the thesis to consider how various configurations of IPH were narrated and visualised in relation to broader anxieties about gendered subjectivity, morality, and domestic order and how different methods of killing carried distinct gendered implications. Similarly, the temporal and geographical spread allows for an examination of how IPH was portrayed across various legal and cultural contexts within Britain. In addition to the main cases, I have consulted a broader range of IPH examples from the period for comparative purposes, enriching the analysis and highlighting both patterns and anomalies in representation and response. The chapter on poisoning draws on multiple examples spanning the nineteenth century, reflecting the sustained cultural and legal anxieties surrounding poison as a perceived epidemic of the time. To ensure transparency and to reflect the broader scope of the research process, a complete list of all street literature texts consulted—whether cited directly or not—are included in the bibliography.

## **The Chapters**

The central question that reverberates throughout my project is: how does the complex interplay of visual and verbal texts in street literature—particularly broadsides and chapbooks—represent and reframe real-life cases of IPH in relation to contemporary, often gendered, anxieties, assumptions,

and practices? To answer this question, the thesis follows a thematic and comparative logic. My first chapter addresses the portrayal of the Holloway case in which a husband killed his wife Celia by strangulation and dismembered her body due to financial struggles in 1831 near Preston, Brighton. This chapter ponders how street literature represented male-perpetrated spousal murder through a close analysis of three key areas: the visual and verbal tensions in street literature depictions of the Holloway case, the narrative reframing of male guilt and accountability when it comes to wife-killing; and the intersection of male violence with contemporary ideas of moral failure and criminal pathology.

Chapter Two explores the portrayal of Margaret Shuttleworth (maiden name Tindal) in an 1821 case from Montrose, Scotland, in which she allegedly struck her husband three times on the head with a poker while intoxicated, resulting in his death.<sup>72</sup> This chapter investigates how her story was constructed and mediated through narrative choices, visual and verbal rhetoric, and religious and legal frameworks in Scottish street literature and the press. The chapter first considers the narrative framing and potential partialities in the storytelling of her trial and execution. It then compares the treatment of Shuttleworth's case to similar legal cases involving men, revealing gendered disparities in sentencing and representation. A third section scrutinises how Christian morality influenced cultural interpretations of her actions and fate. Finally, the chapter assesses the role of dissection not only as a forensic practice but also as a gendered form of punishment.

Chapter Three expands beyond the single-case focus of the previous chapters to explore poison as a gendered weapon, analysing a series of nineteenth-century cases involving female poisoners. I

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72. A chapbook titled *The Trial of Margaret Tindal, Alias Shuttleworth, for the Murder of Her Husband, Henry Shuttleworth, Vintner, Montrose, at Perth, on the 19th day of September, 1821*, 2nd ed. (Montrose: John Smith, 1821), Internet Archive, accessed 18 May 2023, <https://archive.org/details/TheTrialOfMargaretTindalAliasShuttleworthForTheMurderOfHer/page/n3/mode/2up>.

pay particular attention to the 1821 case of Ann Barber, who poisoned her husband in Lincolnshire, England, allegedly to pursue a relationship with her lover. In the first section, I examine how representations of poison were constructed as a distinctly feminine method of murder. I explore how monetary motives were frequently invoked to reinforce this gendered framing, analyse legal responses to and the treatment of female poisoners, and compare these portrayals with those of male poisoners to reveal gendered disparities in both narrative framing and judicial outcomes. The second section examines how medical jurisprudence interpreted poisoning through emerging scientific and forensic discourse, particularly in relation to female criminality and physical evidence.

By opening with a case of male-perpetrated physical violence, moving to a female-perpetrated act of impulsive violence, and concluding with a broader exploration of poisoning as a culturally gendered method, the thesis reflects the statistical and social norm of IPH as a predominantly male crime. It establishes a baseline for how spousal violence was framed when committed by adult men. This structure enables closer critical scrutiny of how cultural narratives evolved when women transgressed traditional domestic and moral boundaries. It also highlights contrasts in narrative framing, gendered assumptions, regional-legal contexts and supports a sustained analysis of how broadsides and chapbooks constructed meaning through both textual and visual forms. Taken together, the three chapters provide a multilayered perspective on the representation of IPH in nineteenth-century street literature, revealing how these texts negotiated cultural anxieties about gendered roles, authority, violence, and justice within the domestic sphere.

## Chapter 1

### Barbarism begins at home: Overt Violence in the John Holloway case in 1831

Within the past few months, the public has been shocked with the number and atrocity of the cases of aggravated assaults on women, wives in particular, and to these we shall limit our attention, as their ill-treatment generically includes the whole of the barbarism. Probably the greater publicity given by the press to this offence may have somewhat exaggerated its extent. Be that as it may, the fact remains staring us in the face, like a huge blot on our presumption to be thought better in our ways than our forefathers were, that wife-beating among certain classes is as common as showers in April, and the wife-beaters a set of men whose savagery in its exposure has alarmed and disgusted the nation.

—‘Wife-Beating and Wife-Beaters’, *The London Journal, and Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art* 61, no. 1563 (23 January 1875): 52.

This extract from *The London Journal* (1875) sounds a note of deep alarm at how widespread crimes of intimate partner violence had become in an era that some parliamentary and civic leaders hailed as one of progressive enlightenment and rational restraint.<sup>1</sup> What *The London Journal* goes on to register is that the epidemic of ‘wife-beating among certain classes’ affords irrefutable and sobering evidence of a ‘nation’ tainted by insular atavisms and toxic, regressive tendencies—what it terms as ‘savagery’.

As *The Saturday Review* similarly concluded in 1857, in specific strata of ‘society’, ‘we are as bad and brutal as perhaps we were a thousand years ago’.<sup>2</sup> These cultural narratives, however, often aligned

1. ‘Wife-Beating and Wife-Beaters’, *The London Journal, and Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art* 61, no. 1563 (23 January 1875): 52, ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/wife-beating-beaters/docview/3514999/se-2?accountid=14540>; Critic Violet Fenn remarks, at the time parliamentary leaders wished to project an image of their time as one ‘of rules and regulations, with the State as overlord and endless guidelines for living one’s life in the most civilised and moralistic way possible’. For more, see Violet Fenn, *Sex and Sexuality in Victorian Britain* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2020), xi. Fenn’s argument is supported by cultural historian V.A.C. Gatrell, who states that murder and assault rates gradually diminished due to a more organised and effective police force, the rise of the Evangelical Movement, and educational reforms. Politicians, magistrates, and reformers all implemented policies that appreciably reduced the amount of blood shed in English streets and prisons. See V.A.C. Gatrell, ‘The Decline of Theft and Violence in Victorian and Edwardian England’, in *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500*, edited by V.A.C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman, and Geoffrey Parker (London: Europa Publications Ltd., 1980), 300, 238-337.

2. ‘Wife-Beating’, *The Saturday Review* 3, no. 81 (16 May 1857): 446-447, ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 27 March 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/wife-beating/docview/9489236/se-2>.

IPV with the ‘lower orders’ or ‘dangerous classes’—an urban proletariat lacking moral training and thus prone to instinctual promptings that would lead to domestic discord and even fatalities.<sup>3</sup> As this chapter demonstrates, street literature reinforces this assumption through highly sensationalised portrayals of labouring-class male violence, framing such crimes as the inevitable outcome of men’s brutish and ungovernable nature. As Martin J. Wiener documents, drawing on nineteenth-century newspapers, ‘the male abuser [was placed] in the category of male “otherness”; the abuser was the vicious, idle slumdweller who represented the antithesis of the “normal,” respectable breadwinner’.<sup>4</sup> He adds, ‘the new sensitivity to violence against women was diverted away from threatening the middle and upper classes to anti-working class purposes’.<sup>5</sup> While IPV was not confined to the ‘lower’ classes, and some affluent men faced public scrutiny, street literature appears to have disproportionately focused on labouring-class perpetrators.

The sensational coverage of the 1831 Holloway case in street literature provides a striking example of this class-based representational divide. After several years of an unhappy marriage, John William Holloway left Celia, his wife, for another woman. ‘Enraged’ that he still had to send money to support Celia, he strangled her and cut her throat before dismembering the body and burying it.<sup>6</sup> The murder took place near Preston, Brighton, while Celia was in the late stages of her third pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the Holloway case also coincided with key legal debates and reforms that

3. Susan S. M. Edwards, *Policing Domestic Violence: Women, the Law and the State* (London: Sage, 1989), 53.

4. Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 8 March 2025, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=255208>.

5. Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 156.

6. Martin J. Wiener, ‘Alice Arden to Bill Sikes: Changing Nightmares of Intimate Violence in England, 1558–1869’, *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 2 (April 2001): 208, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3070735>.

7. The case was covered in ‘The Murder at Brighton’, *The Spectator* 4, no. 165 (27 August 1831): 826, accessed 26 February 2025,

reflected a growing societal concern with male-perpetrated IPV. Among these were the 1828 Offences Against the Person Act, which abolished petit treason convictions for women who killed their husbands, and the 1829 establishment of the Metropolitan Police, intended to regulate crime more systematically.<sup>8</sup> As Wiener observes, these legal and policing developments mirrored how 'Men's violence, particularly against women, became in this period a matter of greater import than ever before, evoking strong but complex and often conflicting sentiments and legal actions'.<sup>9</sup>

The murder was covered in a myriad of printed broadside ballads and over a hundred newspaper articles. The case also appeared in a volume published in 1832 (purportedly) by John Holloway and various contributors: *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway: With an Accurate Account of All the Mysterious and Extraordinary Circumstances Which Led to the Discovery of Her Mangled Body in the Copse in the Lover's Walk at Preston, Near Brighton; Including Also the Trial for the Murder, and the Extraordinary Confessions of John William Holloway, Together with His Life, Written by Himself, and Published by His Own Desire, for the Benefit of Young People*.<sup>10</sup> Although far longer than a

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<http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/murder-at-brighton/docview/1295233189/se-2>.

8. Surridge claims that [t]he 1828 Act marked a significant step forward in addressing marital violence by ensuring that abusive husbands could be held accountable through legal proceedings in magistrates' courts. While sentences were often lenient, the Act provided a swift and accessible legal remedy, offering a crucial avenue of protection for victims. By extending its jurisdiction to include battery and assault, the legislation played a pivotal role in empowering abused women to seek justice against their husbands for the first time in England, setting a precedent for future legal reforms in domestic abuse cases. Lisa Anne Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 18, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 25 May 2025. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1773366>.

9. Wiener, *Men of Blood*, xii.

10. John William Holloway and Various Hands, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway: With an Accurate Account of All the Mysterious and Extraordinary Circumstances Which Led to the Discovery of Her Mangled Body in the Copse in the Lover's Walk at Preston, Near Brighton; Including Also the Trial for the Murder, and the Extraordinary Confessions of John William Holloway, Together with His Life, Written by Himself, and Published by His Own Desire, for the Benefit of Young People* (London: W. Nute, 1832), Internet Archive, accessed 6 March 2025, <https://archive.org/details/anauthenticandf00hollgoog>.

typical chapbook, the volume shares key features of street literature in its sensational tone, moralising editorial voice, woodcut illustrations, and strong appeal to a popular readership.<sup>11</sup> It compiles multiple narrative strands typically found in chapbooks such as the ones discussed in the next chapter: a detailed account of Holloway's life from childhood to death; the circumstances of his coerced marriage to Celia and their eventual separation; his burgeoning relationship with Ann Kennett and acts of bigamy; letters exchanged between Holloway and his mother; his confessions; accounts of the crime scene and the discovery of Celia's body; trial reports; and, finally, his execution.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite the abundance of street literature representations of the Holloway case, these texts have rarely been parsed as literary works worthy of close textual and visual analysis. Social and cultural historian Wiener acknowledges the widespread depiction of the case in street literature, noting that the trial and execution of Holloway generated 'the largest outpouring of broadsides and chapbooks for a wife-killing in English history up to that time', with publications appearing across the country. However, rather than scrutinising the content of these depictions, he treats their sheer volume as evidence of the case's exceptional cultural status. He identifies Holloway as 'the first famous wife-killer of the century' and frames the case as a 'transitional' moment in broadside literature, marking a shift from the earlier figure of the 'seducer-killer'—men who preyed on

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11. David Atkinson notes, 'Some bibliographers define a chapbook strictly as a small book printed on a single sheet of paper, folded into a booklet, typically of between eight and twenty-four pages. Others would say that a chapbook was anything carried and sold by a chapman'. See David Atkinson, 'Chapmen's Books Printed for Henry Woodgate and Samuel Brooks (1757–61)', in *Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Atkinson and Steve Roud (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), 138, accessed 19 May 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=30750082>.

12. The case also remains significant in the regional crime history of Brighton and Hove, having been retrospectively linked to later high-profile cases, such as the infamous 'Trunk Murders'. See W.H. Johnson, *Brighton's First Trunk Murderer 1831* (Eastbourne: Downway Books, 1995); David Rowland, *Brighton Trunk Murders* (London: Finsbury Publishing, 2008).

unmarried women—to the emergence of the ‘wife-murderers’ as the new ‘popular villains’.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, medical historian Elizabeth T. Hurren treats the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume within a broader context of medical and penal history, focusing on anatomical punishment and the criminal corpse.<sup>14</sup> The only critic to engage directly with the literary facets of street literature surrounding the Holloway case is Amy Billings, who devotes a few pages to assessing one broadside of John Holloway’s execution, using it as a case study to explicate how rhetorical choices reflect both readership demand and printers’ commercial strategies.<sup>15</sup> While she acknowledges the broadside’s multiple semiotic layers—its visual presentation, detailed illustrations, prose narrative, and ballad—her discussion remains anchored in how these elements collectively cater to the desires of a labouring-class audience.

This chapter addresses this critical neglect and examines multiple examples, including a range of broadsides and the published volume. I explore how the visual and verbal tensions within and across these forms negotiate nineteenth-century discourses on male-perpetrated spousal murder—a particularly charged form of IPV—I particularly attend to the competing narratives they generate. As we will see in this chapter, some accounts stress the depravity of Holloway’s actions, depicting him as animalistic or monstrous, while others mitigate his guilt through victim-blaming, psychological rationalisation, or casting him as a quasi-tragic figure. These contradictory framings sometimes coexist within the exact same text, reflecting the broader instability of meaning at play. Street literature often resists the moral clarity sought by legal discourse, presenting fragmented and

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13. Wiener, ‘Alice Arden to Bill Sikes’, 208.

14. Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-Execution Punishment in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

15. Amy Billings, ‘When Form Meets Desire: The Transformation of the Early Nineteenth-Century Gallows Broadside’ (MA thesis, University of Kansas, 2021), 24-34.

conflicting portrayals of wife-killers and creating spaces where meaning remains unsettled, layered, dissonant, and ambiguous.

The Holloway case offers a strategically significant starting point for this thesis: not only has its exceptional prominence in street literature received limited textual analysis, it also occupies a pivotal moment in nineteenth-century Britain's social and legal history. As such, its representations in street literature serve as a cultural barometer for how wife-killers were framed in popular print at this time. It thus sets the stage for the comparative analysis of husband-killers in Chapters Two and Three. Moreover, the extreme physical brutality of the crime—strangulation followed by dismemberment—provides a compelling counterpoint to the more covert or clandestine methods of spousal murder examined in subsequent chapters.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first analyses the visual and verbal elements through which the brutal act of murder itself was depicted in broadsides, examining how different literary and visual media framed male-perpetrated spousal murder. It considers how narrative choices, visual illustration, and textual design—including prose or verse form, typography, capitalisation, and layout—functioned together, sometimes reinforcing or contradicting one another, to mediate the case for a popular readership. The second section shifts focus to the reception and framing of the crime, exploring how street literature depicted male-perpetrated IP murder not simply as an act of violence but as a site of narrative negotiation around guilt. It ponders how discourses of childhood experience, economic hardship, and victim-blaming were deployed to explain or excuse Holloway's actions. The third section addresses how street literature engages with contemporary ideas of male madness, moral degeneration, and criminal pathology. It scrutinises how narratives of wife-killing intersect with cultural and medical discourses that situated male violence as a symptom of psychological instability or social deviance rather than as purely criminal intent.

### 1.1 Visual-Verbal Tensions

This section concerns the interplay between textual and visual elements in broadsides and chapbooks depicting John Holloway's murder of his wife. Such interplay invites readers to interrogate dominant narratives of labouring-class, male-perpetrated IP murder, as the fusion of word and image complicates—and occasionally unsettles—cultural notions of guilt, gendered subjectivity, and moral authority, particularly as they are shaped through narrative control. This dynamic between text and image is essential to grasp how these broadsides and chapbooks were received and interpreted. Kate Bates argues that the significance of crime broadsides lies in 'the cumulative gleaning of the whole genre'.<sup>16</sup> When we overlook the function of illustration in favour of a text-focused assessment of Holloway's case, we miss how such cultural production would have been understood in its nineteenth-century context. V.A.C. Gatrell observes, '[i]t is in the illustrations, so little attended to by historians, that the broadsheet's iconic meaning becomes explicit'.<sup>17</sup> Scholars such as Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini, with the assistance of Kris McAbee, have approached broadsides primarily through their textual content, often giving less sustained attention to the visual elements that shape meaning and audience reception. Their edited collection, *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800*, gathers essays that recognise the interaction between text and image, yet the visual dimension remains largely secondary to literary and historical analysis.<sup>18</sup> My study builds on this approach by focusing on how the interaction of verbal and visual components in street literature operates as multimodal storytelling that invites multiple readings and

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16. Kate Bates, *Crime, Broadsides and Social Change, 1800-1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3-4.

17. V.A.C Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175.

18. Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, and Kris McAbee, eds., *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

complicates the construction of meaning without privileging one mode over the other.<sup>19</sup> Rather than treating prose, ballads, and illustrations as separate elements, I consider how their dynamic interaction constructs the broadside as a distinct cultural form. This approach contests John Davidson's dismissive view that 'the image occupies a secondary and supportive position. [...] Since the image has no individual significance, but only gains meaning in relation to the written word, illustration can be ignored or omitted without loss'.<sup>20</sup>

This sensational, multimedia mode of crime representation in street literature is further complicated by the recurrence of multiple publications addressing a single case, producing uneven, competing, and even contradictory interpretations. At times, these tensions emerged within a single text, where the interplay of prose, verse, and imagery created internal inconsistencies. As I will show in this section, the verbal and visual interplay in representations of the Holloway case reveals a deliberate narrative construction that generates acute tensions and destabilises fixed interpretations of crime and morality. This interplay produces mixed and competing narratives: some evoke the case as moral instruction or cautionary tale, warning the public against such crimes, while others sensationalise the violence to capture attention, reflecting and, at times, destabilising public

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19. Simone Chess contends: 'Though ballad illustrations might seem rough or loosely relevant, they are at the same time a fundamental part of the culture of broadside ballads, their printing history, their readership, and their multiple meanings'. Simone Chess, 'Woodcuts: Methods and Meanings of Ballad Illustration', English Broadside Ballad Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007, accessed 26 February 2025, <https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/woodcuts>.

20. On the same page, Davidson further argues that 'the picture's role is to reflect textual reality—or, within certain limitations, to be interpretive while remaining sympathetic. Made in the word's image, the picture is a lesser—but potentially subversive—repetition of the first creation. Illustration is a charming embellishment, a graceful but inessential beauty added to the letterpress. While the meaning of the image is relative to the meaning of the writing, the reverse is never true: illustration is therefore marginal, peripheral, detachable'. See John Davidson, '“Two Texts, Two Hands, Two Looks: Theories! Theories!” Bitextual Theory and the Marriage of Image and Text', in *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality on the Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books*, ed. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (England: Scolar Press, 1995), 9. Similarly, Paul Goldman asserts 'how crucial illustrations were in maintaining support among the less confident newly literate'. Paul Goldman, *Victorian Illustrated Books 1850–1870: The Heyday of Wood-Engraving* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1994), 62.

perceptions of male-perpetrated IP murder. This tension between text and image is particularly evident in the ‘Horrible Details of the Apprehension, Dreadful Confessions, and Interesting Trial of John William Holloway; for the Murder of His Wife’ broadside.<sup>21</sup> There is a strong sense that printers/publishers craft a dissident plebeian culture that pushes against the genteel values synonymous with metropolitan bourgeois hegemony. The lurid sensationalism of the illustrations and emotive language subvert middle-class ideals of restraint, decorum, and moral superiority, instead embracing a more visceral, even confrontational form of social commentary that centres on labouring-class experiences and emotional realities.

The publication of Holloway’s dual confessions in the ‘Horrible Details’ broadside exemplifies how street literature often accommodated conflicting portrayals of male perpetrators of IP murder, allowing both self-excusing and sensationalised narratives to co-exist. The first reveals its engagement with victim-blaming and shifting accountability narratives—an issue explored in detail in the following section—by presenting the husband as a victim of manipulation: compelled to marry after an unintended pregnancy, deprived of property by his in-laws, and emotionally tormented by his wife. The second confession, by contrast, underscores the violence and includes an admission of premeditated intent to harm her, thereby reinforcing the contradictions in how male perpetrators of IPH were portrayed in street literature. In this second account, made ‘a few days after’ the first, Holloway offers a ‘further’ confession, ‘full of horrifying particulars’, providing a graphic, step-by-step narrative of how he murdered Celia. In the description of how Holloway first approached Celia—‘as if going to kiss her, and suddenly tying a cord about her neck, threw himself upon her body, and exerted all his force to strangle her’—the juxtaposition of Holloway’s staged

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21. ‘Horrible Details of the Apprehension, Dreadful Confessions, and Interesting Trial of John William Holloway; for the Murder of His Wife’, broadside (1831), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 3 December 2024, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990030365840203941>.

affection with his cold execution of the murder heightens its grotesque nature, underlining a sense of betrayal likely to evoke horror in both contemporary and modern audiences. The confession also includes the details of how Holloway hangs Celia's corpse in a closet overnight, only to return the next day to dismember it and dispose of the remains. His actions evince control and premeditation, which undercuts his initial self-presentation as an unfortunate, miserable husband driven to crime by his straitened circumstances. Despite this, the broadside does not wholly dismiss his initial attempt at self-victimisation, instead allowing the two incompatible narratives to coexist—one in which he is a man pushed to extremes by an unhappy marriage and another in which he is an utterly ruthless murderer.

After these two confessions, the broadside further complicates the gendered framing of IPH by drawing a direct comparison between Holloway's crime and an earlier case—that of Ann Aubrey, a French midwife who murdered and dismembered her husband in 1659. The capitalisation of ANN AUBREY's full name makes her name stand out visually, drawing immediate attention to her as a notorious character (see Figure 3). The description of Aubrey's actions is strikingly similar to Holloway's: she 'killed her husband, and afterwards cut him to pieces, with a butcher's cleaver'. The reference to butchering—both in the description of Holloway's crime as 'diabolical Butchering', with Butchering capitalised for emphasis, and the mention of his past job as 'a butcher's boy'—links both Holloway and Aubrey to grotesque, bodily violence. However, their moral framing differs; while Holloway's crime is portrayed as heinous yet complex, Aubrey's is depicted as pure monstrosity, culminating in her execution by hanging and burning. This comparison highlights gendered tensions in the representation of perpetrators of IPH in street literature, as this thesis will show in chapters two and three. Despite the sheer callousness of his crime, Holloway is allowed a dual representation as both a villain and a man who suffered in his marriage. In contrast, Aubrey's murder is presented without room for mitigation. Ultimately, the broadside's structure creates

competing narratives—one that frames Holloway as a calculating, pitiless murderer and another that allows for the possibility that his suffering shaped his crime. This insertion of Aubrey's case is particularly striking given the temporal distance between the two crimes: Aubrey's murder took place in the seventeenth century, over 150 years before Holloway's. By invoking an earlier, foreign case, the broadside collapses historical boundaries to produce a timeless moral lesson about female monstrosity. This retrospective framing allows the printer to amplify the sensational contrast between genders in IPH cases while eliding the differing social, legal, and cultural contexts of the two eras. In doing so, the text transforms Aubrey into a symbolic figure—an archetype of female excess—whose inclusion serves primarily to reinforce the moral polarity against which Holloway's more 'humanised' suffering can be read. The tension in the portrayal of Holloway between sympathy and condemnation, victimisation and monstrosity undercuts a single conclusive moral standpoint on events, mirroring the splintered, unsettled and unsettling nature of street literature's engagement with crime. Such a quality is apparent in Figure 3 below.

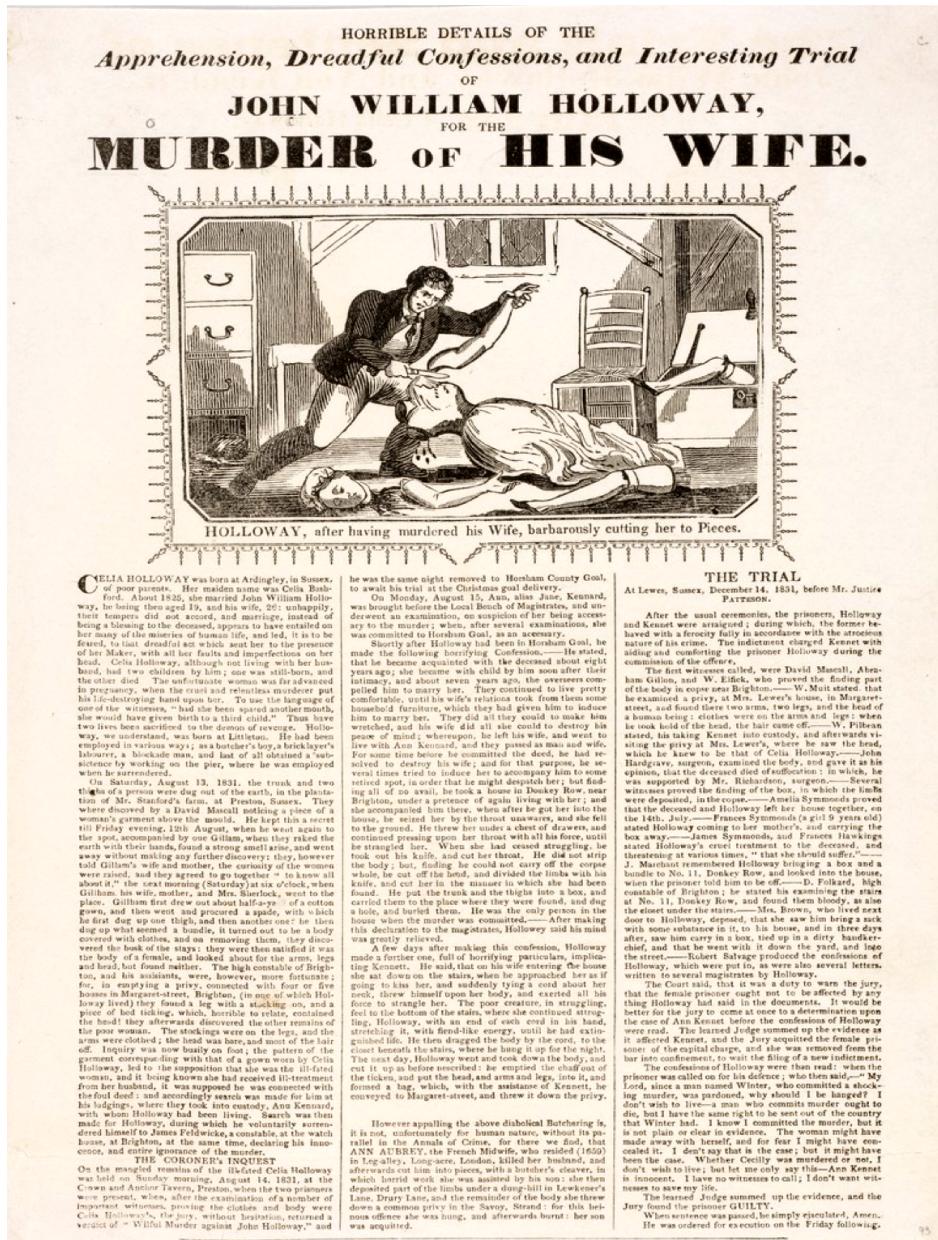


Figure 3. 'Horrible Details of the Apprehension, Dreadful Confessions, and Interesting Trial of John William Holloway; for the Murder of His Wife' broadside.

The visual composition here—typesetting, layout, and illustration—deploys what we might call ‘sick wit’, fusing the matter-of-fact and the macabre, the humorous and the horrifying, in this anatomy of IPH. This illustration, which depicts John Holloway dismembering Celia’s body, visually asserts the male perpetrator’s dominance over domestic space and echoes disturbing themes common in labouring-class ‘penny fiction’, where the dismemberment of a female corpse is often

couched in terms disturbingly akin to sexual violence.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the grotesque verbal descriptions of the crime in the broadside, the visual representation presents a paradoxical framing. The floral border adds decorative delicacy, contrasting with the graphic caption below: 'HOLLOWAY, after having murdered his Wife, barbarously cutting her to Pieces'. In the illustration, Holloway's facial expression shows only mild discomfort; his clothing appears unruffled, and his precise knife work implies anatomical knowledge that exceeds that of butchers or taxidermists. Interestingly, Hurren notes that the murder and subsequent dismemberment of Celia Holloway was a 'textbook copy-cat killing', mimicking the post-execution practices of penal surgeons who dissected criminal corpses, raising contemporary questions about where Holloway had acquired such anatomical skill.<sup>23</sup> Celia's body, meanwhile, is rendered with disconcerting sexualised details: her intact legs adorned with stockings and shoes, an emphasised breast on the limbless torso, and an ostensibly serene, sleep-like expression on the severed head beneath an undisturbed bonnet. Blood is reduced to faint droplets emerging from the arms and neck, as if deftly applied, while everything else remains conspicuously clean, even pristine, heightening the unsettling aestheticization of violence. This design strategy strikes a note of black farce that evokes a mannequin-like body or a disassembled doll rather than the tragic murder of a young mother. The motivation behind this visual presentation may lie either in the publishers' desire to appeal to the broadest possible audience by softening the sheer brutality of the crime or in a broader cultural desensitisation, in which such violence had become so routine that victims were perceived as marionettes or worse, statistics rather than sentient human beings. Whatever the reason, the illustration suggests that Figure 3 functions more as a source of mass

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22. Sally Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', in *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, by Andrew Maunder, ed. Grace Moore (London: Routledge, 2004), 46, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235066>.

23. Hurren, *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse*, 87.

entertainment than empathy, ironically revealing how women's bodies remain sexualised even in death and highlighting a cultural entanglement of morbidity and eroticism. This visual code recalls Punchinello, the hen-pecked, clownish marionette of Restoration spectacle who, by the 1830s, had evolved into the satirical and murderous Punch of street theatre. As Rosalind Crone explains, Punch performances served 'to confront the realities of marital breakdown' at a time when matrimony 'could, for many, degenerate into a farce or tragedy', as unions 'were so hard, legally and socially, to dissolve'.<sup>24</sup>

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24. See Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 67.

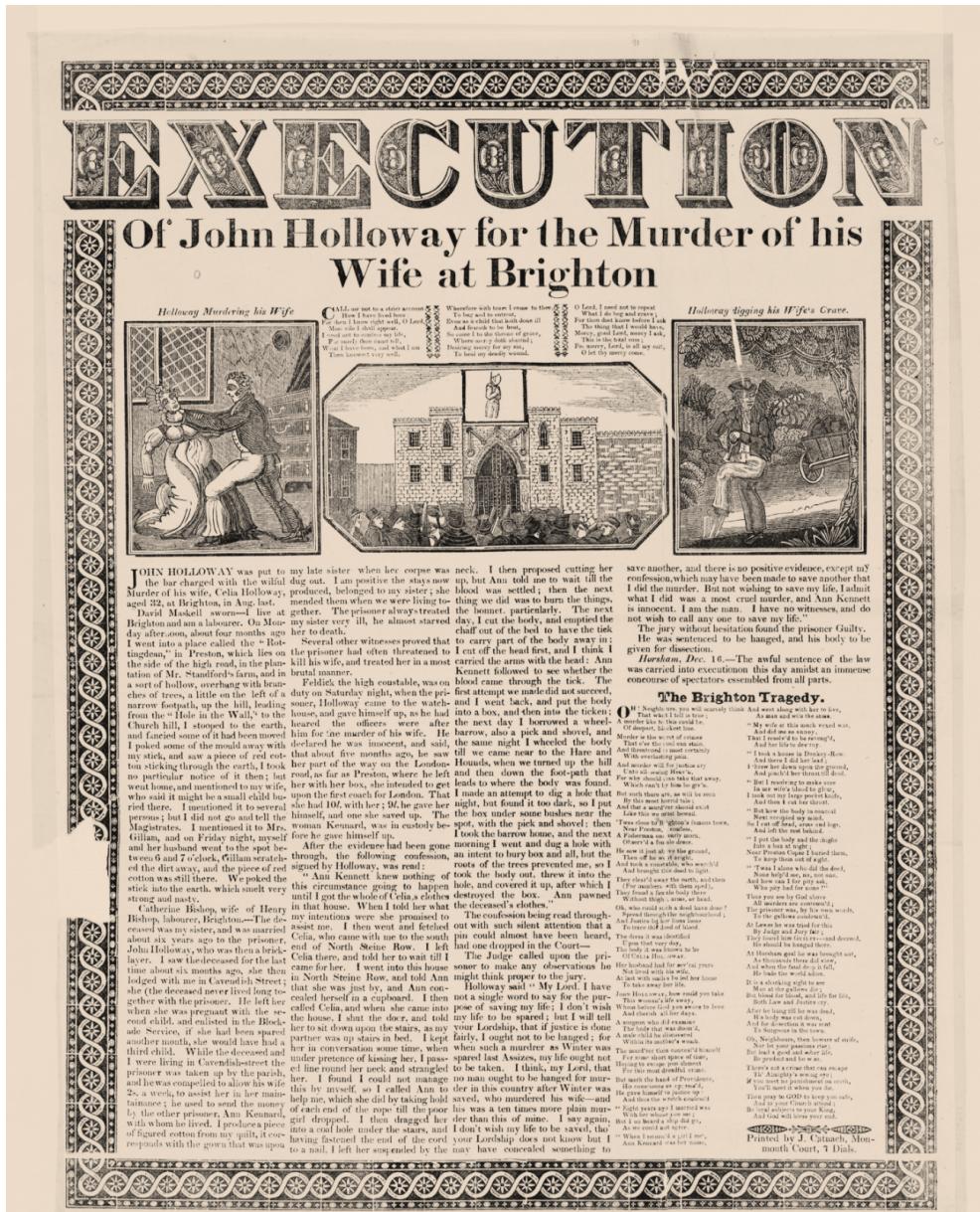


Figure 4. 'Execution of John Holloway for the Murder of His Wife at Brighton; Brighton Tragedy' broadside (1831).

The next broadside, shown in Figure 4, is 'Execution of John Holloway for the Murder of His Wife at Brighton; Brighton Tragedy'.<sup>25</sup> This document, with its distinctive triptych (a three-panel

25. 'Execution of John Holloway for the Murder of His Wife at Brighton; Brighton Tragedy', broadside (London: J. Catnach, 1831), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990069561350203941>.

artwork or composition with interconnected parts), accentuates an interactive form of close reading that prompts us to move between written text and narrative images. The first illustration of the triptych from the left shows John Holloway strangling Celia in a room with a large, closed window. This visual signalling of secrecy—what lies hidden behind the mundane domestic façade—is pervasive across all six broadside illustrations covering the case. Each depicts an indoor room with closed windows, doors, or walls with no openings.<sup>26</sup> This deliberate design ruse underscores how the supposedly protected realm of the nuclear family—a bastion of domestic calm—becomes, for an underclass woman like Celia Holloway, a site of entrapment and horror: not a sanctuary, but a carceral site, a Gothic chamber of confinement, torture, and death. Closed windows and doors in these narrative images position the private sphere as a mysterious, even unknowable enclave, a locus kept separate from workplace routine and less amenable to extended family members. This visual motif, which appears consistently throughout the thesis, exemplifies how IPH was largely beyond the admonitory gaze of concerned neighbours, law enforcement, extended family, and government agencies. The figuration of closed or veiled windows in the crime scene epitomises Bridget Walsh's notion that the 'home was no longer a source of purity and the means whereby virtue was restored; instead, it was an environment dominated by secrecy, one just as likely to foster [...] unregulated desire'—or as Wiener describes it, 'the home seemed to have become the "last retreat" of men's violence'.<sup>27</sup> Closed windows convey the irony that endeavours to reinvent the household as a hermetically-sealed haven created the unintended outcome of leaving Celia Holloway and other underclass women much more exposed to and anxious about sustained domestic abuse. These visual

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26. Figures 3, 4, and 5 all depict closed windows; Figure 11 shows a closed door; and Figures 6 and 15 feature both a closed window and door.

27. Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 94, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 25 May 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1678756>; Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 146.

codes convey a sense of immediacy—a warning that a clear and present danger to domestic serenity exists behind the banal exteriors of British homes. Such illustrations directly relocate the site of intrafamilial cruelty from the historically distant or exotic settings of Gothic romance to the metropolitan zones at the heart of a burgeoning empire, aligning with the Newgate novels, which belong to the same popular milieu and anticipate the later sensation fiction of the 1860s.<sup>28</sup>

In the second illustration of the broadside, which is centred, we move from the closed domestic space to the very public execution of John Holloway. The image depicts a man hanged on top of a building; his face appears covered, and his hands are in front of his chest as if praying for forgiveness. A vast crowd observes the execution with only the backs of their heads and the upper part of their bodies showing. The evocative visual details here reverberate with Robert Lewis Collison's assessment of the Victorians' keen fascination with public hangings: 'the crowds never abated as long as public hangings continued to be held'.<sup>29</sup>

The third illustration, captioned 'Holloway digging his Wife's grave', portrays John Holloway attempting to bury the body. The choice of the word 'grave' imbues the act with an incongruous sense of dignity and care, typically reserved for the burial of a loved one, rather than using a term like 'hole', which would more accurately describe the site of concealment. The semantic and cultural

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28. Juliet John, 'Twisting the Newgate Tale: Popular Culture, Pleasure and the Politics of Genre', in *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Davis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 129–131, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198184614.003.0006>; Pamela K. Gilbert, ed., *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 32–33; see also Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830–1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens & Thackeray* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963).

29. Collison adds that 'the more farsighted printers kept in-stock sets of woodcuts showing various numbers of criminals being hanged'. He describes the nineteenth-century attitude towards crimes stating, 'The gruesome gloating of so many of the bits of doggerel that accompanied these crimes is both astonishing and repellent to the people of today' (49). He argues that crimes and punishments were intriguing to the nineteenth-century public; thousands of people would gather to witness the executions of criminals, in which the patterers sold their broadsheets to. Collison's claims are vital for building my arguments in how peculiar and detrimental the nineteenth-century public fascinations with crimes and public spectacle and how they received it. See Collison, *The Story of Street Literature*, 31–49.

connotations of a ‘grave’ contrast sharply with Holloway’s cold-blooded actions and the suspicious setting depicted, nestled between bushes and trees. Instead of focusing on the task, he looks back as if on guard or anxious about being caught. Overall, by presenting the private murder and subsequent attempts to hide it in smaller side illustrations and prominently displaying the scaffold where Holloway is hanged in the centre, the broadside signifies that criminal acts committed in secrecy will eventually be brought to light. This persistent motif of IPH—measuring the privacy of the crime against the public spectacle of the hanging—buttresses the idea that the consequences of one’s actions, however well disguised, will ultimately face public scrutiny and justice.<sup>30</sup>

While the illustrations in Figure 4 limit the depiction of the murder’s brutality to Holloway strangling Celia and burying her, the ballad ‘The Brighton Tragedy’, which is also part of the same broadside, is far more explicit, immersing the reader in gruesome details that amplify the horror of Celia Holloway’s death. The ballad fixates on bodily violation and dismemberment, presenting the crime in disturbingly explicit terms—I took out my large pocket knife, / And then I cut her throat—before stressing how ‘They found a female body there / Without thigh, arms, or head’. The horror is intensified with the revelation of Celia’s pregnancy—‘A male child he discovered / Within its mother’s womb’—a detail that compounds the crime’s brutality and emotional impact. The ballad’s tone is strikingly detached, as the singsong cadence and rhyming couplets create a disquieting contrast between the mechanical, almost formulaic poetic structure and the grotesque

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30. Gatrell claims that the broadsides and the emblem of the gallows together ‘constructed a set of common ethical postures which all social classes shared—a fragile consensus (always capable of being broken, however, as particular cases dictated) that villainy, especially against others’ bodies, must be punished’. For Gatrell, the law was based on the belief that ‘the world was a school of suffering, and that pain was the path to spiritual rebirth. [...] Those who believed in atonement by faith had to believe also that penal suffering might open the way to redemption and that what mattered was the soul, not the body’. See Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, 164-5. On the symbolic resonances of capital punishment and the assertion of sovereign power see Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany 1600-1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Peter Hodgkinson and Andrew Rutherford, eds. *Capital Punishment: Global Issues and Prospects* (Winchester: Waterside Press, 1996); Roger Hood, *The Death Penalty: A World-Wide Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

content. The steady rhythm and regularity heighten the unsettling effect, as the brutality is evoked in a manner that feels rehearsed, even ritualistic. While the broadside's restrained visual representation allows room for the reader's imagination, the ballad's detailed descriptions remove that distance, forcing the audience to confront the horror directly. This interplay between layout and content, as well as the poetic form and first-person narration of the murder, renders the crime both gripping and grotesque. The broadside's prose style also reflects this vulgarity: 'I proposed cutting her up, but Ann told me to wait until the blood settled' and 'I cut the body [...] I cut off the head first, and I think I carried the arms with the head'. While the illustrations frame the murder as part of a broader narrative of justice and societal order, the ballad sensationalises the crime. It employs its grim details to evoke horror and moral reflection, ensuring the reader is simultaneously repulsed and warned. Despite its lurid tropes, the ballad still fits within the moralising theme of the illustrations, as evident in verses such as 'the worst of crimes / That e'er the soul can stain', which immediately establish murder as both a moral and spiritual transgression that brings 'everlasting pain'. Similarly, the closing admonition—"Then pray to GOD to keep you safe, / And to your Church attend"—reinforces the ballad's didactic purpose.

The visual motif of private crime versus public judgment is also explored in the volume *An Authentic and Faithful History*, as shown in Figure 5.<sup>31</sup>

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31. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 130.

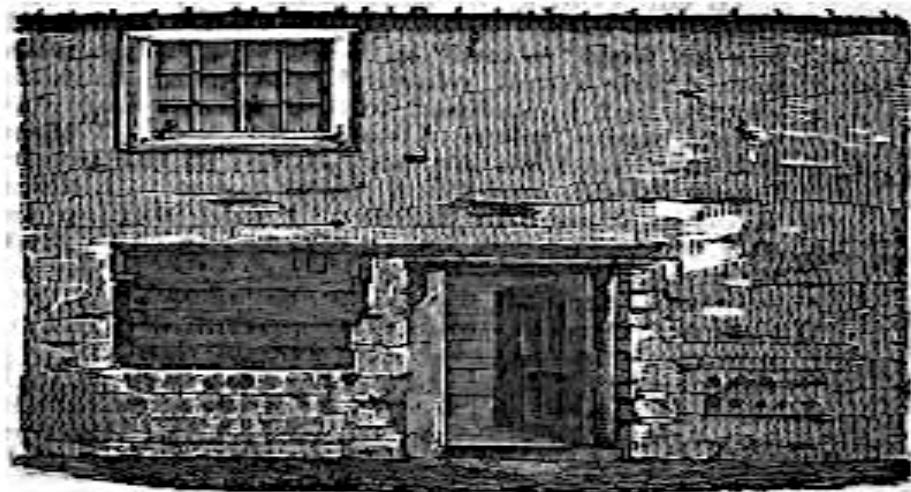


Figure 5. The house in 'Donkey Row' where the murder occurred, as illustrated in *An Authentic and Faithful History*.

In this figure, the illustration of the house's exterior in Donkey Row, where the murder occurred, offers a carefully composed visual narrative that subtly reinforces theme. The two-storey building features two distinct windows: the upper window shows its sash panels drawn closed, while the window on the ground floor, where the murder is said to have occurred, is not only closed but also fully shuttered. This contrast is visually significant. The upper room appears merely sealed, while the lower room is deliberately obscured, suggesting a heightened need for concealment. These closed and shuttered windows evoke a domestic space turned inward, shielded from public scrutiny and reflective of the silencing and culturally ingrained invisibility surrounding domestic violence. In this sense, the composition gestures toward what Henry James famously called 'the house of fiction', where each window frames only a restricted view of interior life—here, a literal and metaphorical rendering of the fragmented, hidden truths that structure the narrative.<sup>32</sup> Notably, the front door is shown half open, a detail that introduces a layer of ambiguity and unease. This partial openness may symbolise the act of deception Holloway recounts in the text, where he lures Celia into the house

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32. Henry James, Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46

under false pretences. His measured, deliberate confession—‘I arose from my bed with a determination to take away her innocent life’—and his chilling admission, ‘I said nothing to anyone of what was in my mind’, underline the atmosphere of secrecy and psychological containment.<sup>33</sup> The half-open door becomes a metaphor for ensnarement and moral duplicity—a visual moment that reflects the private nature of spousal murder. It suggests that the simple act of closing the door behind her becomes the difference between life and death. This interpretation is validated later in the volume in another illustration that shows ‘the interior of the house in Donkey Row, where the fatal act was committed’ (see Figure 6).<sup>34</sup>

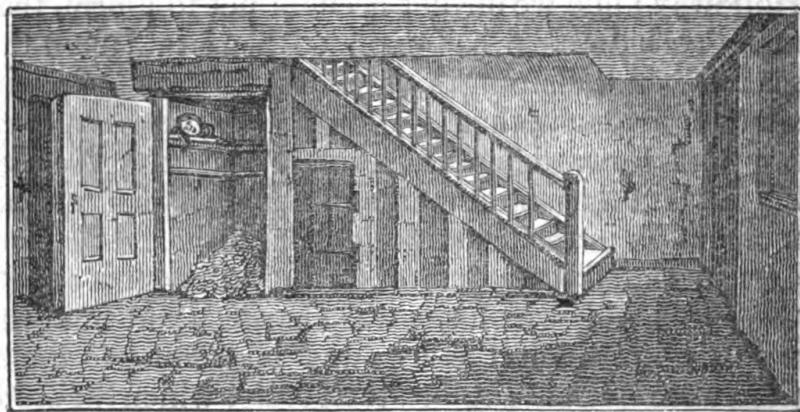


Figure 6. The interior of the house where the murder took place.

This illustration clearly depicts the front door and the house’s window as firmly shut. Such visual detail is reinforced by the verbal text. As Holloway recalls: ‘When she got there, I said my mate was not up yet, and desired her to step in, for that we would wait for him; and I shut too the door’.<sup>35</sup> The phrasing ‘shut too the door’—an older expression meaning to close the door wholly and firmly—strikes a note of bleak finality. It underscores the deliberate nature of the act, marking the precise

33. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 129.

34. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 232.

35. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 233.

moment of entrapment. The combination of the tightly closed door in the image and the formal closure implied in the narrative emphasises the transition from public visibility to private, fatal enclosure.

The motif of privacy surrounding IP murder is emphasised in the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume through two additional visual depictions. The first delineates Holloway and Ann Kennett carrying the box in the middle of the night, unseen by others (see Figure 7).<sup>36</sup>

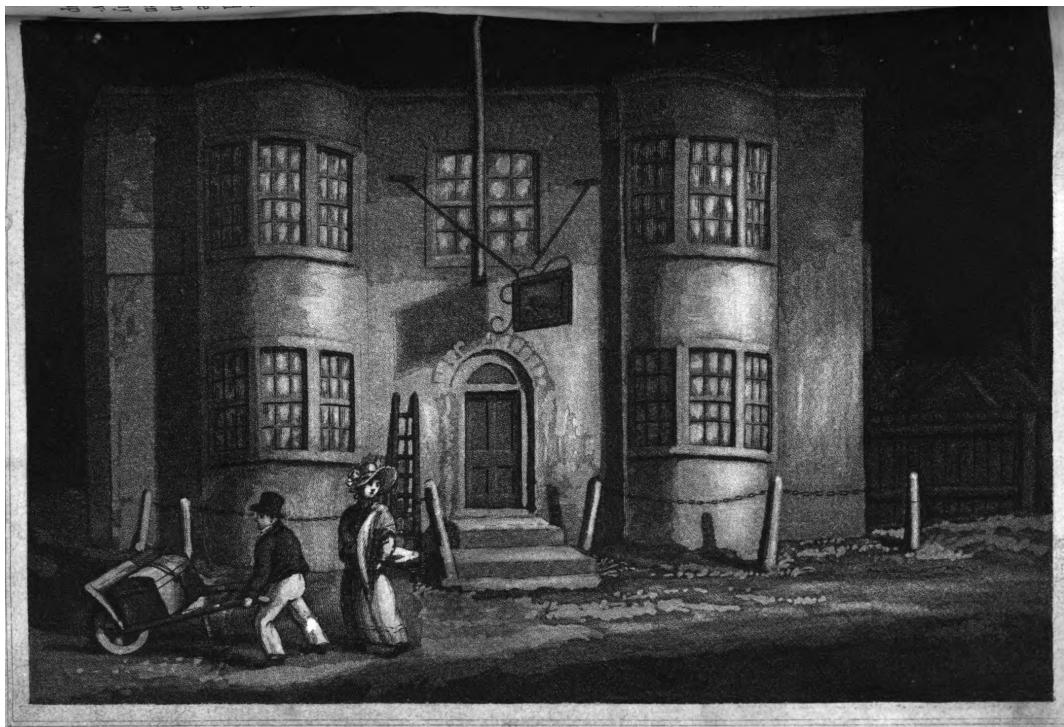


Figure 7. John Holloway and Ann Kennet are trying to get rid of Celia's body in the middle of the night.

The illustration in Figure 7 shows Ann Kennett glancing over her shoulder as if watching out for onlookers while Holloway pushes the box ahead. The accompanying text deepens the atmosphere of secrecy and internalised horror, as it stresses that the body was taken to a 'place of secrecy' at night, intensifying the sense of moral and emotional concealment at work.<sup>37</sup> The other illustration depicts

36. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, between 242 and 243.

37. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 242.

the secluded area—dense with bushes and tall trees—that provided cover for Holloway's actions. It was here, in 'Lover's Walk', that he buried part of Celia's body (see Figure 8).<sup>38</sup>



Figure 8. An illustration of The burial place in Lover's Walk.

Notably, the image also features two announcement banners stapled to separate trees—likely

38. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, between 146 and 147.

intended as public notices. One bears the initials 'JH', perhaps referencing John Holloway himself and marking his symbolic presence within the landscape of the crime. The second appears to depict a white human figure with a circular form over the stomach area, potentially signifying Celia, who was pregnant at the time of her murder. These visual elements function as symbolic devices: the initials publicly name the perpetrator, while the marked body alludes to the compounded violence of both spousal and foetal death. In doing so, the banners stage a visual tension between private crime and public revelation, inserting spectacle into a secluded natural landscape. Though committed in secrecy, the crime is thus visually framed for communal witnessing, exposing the concealed act while implicating the voyeuristic viewer in its unfolding.

The progression from private crime to public spectacle culminates in another illustration within the same volume, depicting the crowd outside the Crown and Anchor where Holloway's trial unfolds (see Figure 9).<sup>39</sup>



Figure 9. Public gathering outside the Crown and Anchor during Holloway's trial.

39. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, between 172 and 173.

The accompanying text insists on the extraordinary scale of the scene, noting that the crowd ‘amounted to several thousands, literally blocking up the road’.<sup>40</sup> In the crowd, a stark contrast emerges: while most figures face away from the viewer, several men who do face forward have unsettling, corpse-like features—hollowed eyes, dark nasal cavities, and gaping mouths—more skeletal than human. In contrast, the two women, positioned to the left and right of the illustration’s central area, stand out for their vividly human facial features. One looks frightened, wide-eyed and alert; the other gazes downward, contemplative, even mournful. Multiple figures also appear in the three open windows of the building, and while one may represent a woman, possibly Ann Kennett, the illustration offers no explicit confirmation. The accompanying verbal text preceding the image claims that Ann Kennett is seated at one of the windows, ‘apparently indifferent to the extraordinary scene [ . . . ] in which she herself bore so prominent a part’.<sup>41</sup> However, the illustration portrays her facial features as indistinct, rendered no more clearly than the shadowy forms in the adjacent windows. This stark gendering of visual legibility between men and women in the crowd may reflect what the opening contemporary article identifies as the normative scripts of IPH: male-perpetrated and female-suffered. As it states, ‘wife-beating among certain classes is as common as showers in April’.<sup>42</sup> Ann Kennett, however, disrupts this binary. She is both named and subjected to public humiliation, yet visually effaced. As Holloway’s lover and alleged accomplice in the murder, she is verbally framed as a cold, unfazed participant. However, the illustration’s failure to give her either an emotive expression like the women or a cadaverous face like the men may reflect the text’s uncertainty about her role, especially considering Holloway’s contradictory statements and her

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40. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 172.

41. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 172.

42. ‘Wife-Beating and Wife-Beaters’, *London Journal* 61, no. 1563 (23 January 1875), 52.

eventual acquittal. This visual ambiguity reinforces her representational instability, positioning her as central to the crime yet resistant to fixed moral or emotional categorisation. It may also reflect contemporary unease about representing female complicity in such callous, overt violence, as evidenced by the fact that among all the broadsides' illustrations depicting the murder, only one includes her presence during the dismembering scene.<sup>43</sup> Judith Knelman notes that at the time when a couple committed violence, the woman often escaped the full force of public scrutiny; she was overshadowed by her male counterpart. The man bore the brunt of public outrage, as '[t]he Victorian assumption that a man was likely to have been the leader in such behaviour protected [the female accomplice] to some extent'.<sup>44</sup> This reluctance to acknowledge violent female agency may have shaped the selective visual and textual portrayal of women in such crimes, buttressing dominant ideals of passive femininity.

Interestingly, the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume complicates Knelman's view. While the first illustration places Ann Kennett within the spectacle of the trial, the second—though a solitary portrait—is also situated within the context of public judgment, as its caption reads: 'As she appeared at the Trial of Holloway' (see Figure 10).<sup>45</sup> Together, the two images emphasise her exposure to public scrutiny, not as a participant in the violence but as a figure on display for societal evaluation.

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43. Confession of the Barbarous Murder Committed by John Holloway on the Body of His Wife; and Cutting off Her Head, Arms, & Legs', broadside (London: T. Birt, 1831), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 2 April 2025, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990030366650203941>.

44. Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 205, accessed April 4, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=4672202>.

45. Holloway et al., *An Authentic and Faithful History*, between 250 and 251.



Figure 10. Ann Kennett's portrait.

By contrast, John Holloway—the murderer himself—is relatively absent from public visual exposure or condemnation. Apart from the initials 'JH' carved into the tree in the Lover's Walk illustration, he appears visually only twice—and notably, never in a public setting: once in the frontispiece portrait alone and again in an image set in the jail's infirmary, surrounded by a small group of visitors. I examine both illustrations later in the chapter. This contrast highlights the uneven distribution of public denunciation. It draws attention to the gendered dynamics at work in how guilt, exposure, and narrative significance are visually assigned in street literature. Whereas Holloway's image is illustrated away from the spectacle and removed from moments of collective witnessing, two of Ann Kennett's three illustrations in *Authentic History* are explicitly situated during the trial—one within a

crowded, public courtroom scene, the other in a solitary portrait that also anchors her within the judicial process.



Figure 11. 'The Execution of John Wm. Holloway, Aged 25, with his Confession of the Platform' broadside (1831). Bottom portion of the original source is missing in the archived copy.

Figure 11 is a broadside titled 'The Execution of John Wm. Holloway, Aged 25, with His

Confession on the Platform; Who Was Executed at Horsham, for the Wilful Murder of Celia Holloway, His Wife'.<sup>46</sup> Like the examples discussed earlier, it revisits familiar motifs—the juxtaposition of private crime and public punishment—but distinguishes itself by condensing multiple phases of Holloway's narrative into a single visual object. Its triptych structure captures three distinct yet interconnected moments: the execution, the trial, and the murder. These scenes together foreground the stark contrast between public justice, courtroom control, and private savagery, forcing the viewer to navigate conflicting portrayals of the same man. The first illustration, located in the top left, is the largest, a woodcut depicting Holloway being hanged. The execution, set on top of a building, draws attention to the gallows, which are raised much higher to create a public spectacle out of John's execution. The second illustration portrays the public trial, showing John Holloway standing straight and speaking to a judge in a courtroom with his hand raised. His tall and assertive posture symbolises Holloway's capability to assert his perspective or defend his actions during the trial. However, the third illustration complicates this view of Holloway. It vividly creates a scene of slaughter, showing him behind a closed door, using his right knee to support Celia's weight. At the same time, his left arm clutches her head, positioning her throat for a fatal cut. With his right hand, he savagely slices through her throat, causing blood to gush forth in several directions as it hits the floor, unlike the few restrained droplets depicted in Figure 3. Celia is portrayed here with a hauntingly unblemished face as she desperately grasps his arm in a futile attempt to resist her fate. The graphic scene is rendered even more disturbing by John's grotesque, even feral appearance. His facial features are drawn as overtly animalistic, with rough strokes depicting his facial hair, random lines across his face, and spiky, dishevelled hair. Also, his exaggerated expression—a wide,

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46. 'The Execution of John Wm. Holloway, Aged 25, with His Confession on the Platform; Who Was Executed at Horsham, for the Wilful Murder of Celia Holloway, His Wife', broadside (1831), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 2 March 2025, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990030366230203941>.

gaping mouth revealing prominent teeth and large, bulging, dilated eyes—suggest an atavistic specimen.

Such tension within the visual representation becomes more pronounced when placed in dialogue with the accompanying ballad text. The dynamic between broadside illustrations and their ballads presents a direct paradox: while one illustration depicts Holloway as composed in court and another as a brutal killer, the ballad denies him any voice, with no opportunity to confess or justify his actions. It is important to note that the ballad was written under the court image with the caption ‘A copy of Verses Written on the above Occasion’. An example of third-person narration, the ballad seems like a court stripping Holloway of agency and reframing his crime through the lens of swift public judgment:

He in a privy threw her limbs,  
There also put her head,  
How barbarous he used her,  
Before that was dead;  
But Justice did him overtake, and that right speedily,  
And that for the same his day end,  
Upon the gallows high.

These lines show the secretive nature of the crime (in a ‘privy’) and the public punishment in ‘gallows high’, reinforcing a recurrent motif of IPH street literature. The line ‘But Justice did him overtake’ is particularly significant as it highlights his absent voice. The use of the word ‘overtake’, which means to go past something by being more substantial, underscores how the ballad replaces Holloway’s cadence with a moralising focus on the devastation he has wrought on his mother and the wider community.<sup>47</sup> ‘His mother weeps in silent woe, / Her son’s disgrace she dare not show,’ signifies that his crime not only condemns him but also taints those connected to him. The ultimate justice of his punishment is emphasised with the stark declaration, ‘He died exposed to public gaze /

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47. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. ‘overtake’, accessed 17 May 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/overtake>.

upon the fatal Tree', ensuring that his downfall is made into a spectacle, just as his crime had shocked the public. The ballad denies Holloway any plea for mercy, instead turning his crime against him: 'When you killed your faithful virtuous / You would no mercy give'. Here, the symmetry of punishment is laid bare—just as Holloway showed none to Celia, he receives none in return. His brutality is elaborated in the lines:

O did you ever hear a deed,  
So barbarous and severe,  
As Holloway did of late commit,  
On his virtuous wife so dear?

The question directly addresses the audience, heightening the horror by framing the crime as beyond comprehension. The repetition of 'barbarous' three times, also in 'He mangled her most barbarously' and 'How barbarous he used her', highlights his inhumanity, stripping him of any claim to civility that his composed courtroom manner in the illustration had implied. Until the end, the ballad ensures that Holloway is judged but never heard; this becomes especially clear by how the ballad contrasts Ann Kennett's plea with Holloway's sentencing. The text grants Ann Kennett the ability to protest:

Ann Kennett did beside him stand,  
With Holloway she was tried,  
She said my Lord I am innocent,  
I am innocent she cried.

The repetition of 'I am innocent' highlights that the ballad presents the other defendant's perspective twice, but not his. However, immediately after Kennett's plea, the narrative shifts abruptly: 'When Holloway was tried and cast, / The judge to him did say'. The structure here is crucial—Holloway is not given a moment to speak, react, or even acknowledge his fate. The judge's words are final, and Holloway's silence is absolute; this blatantly contrasts with his visual representation in court, where he appears confident and articulate. The ballad's refusal to accord him the same space in its narration is a pointed editorial decision, ensuring that the only version of

Holloway available here is the one condemned by the court and vilified by public sentiment. The judge's words further strip him of agency:

You must return from whence you came,  
And wait the awful day,  
Your days must end Friday next,  
Upon the fatal tree.

The phrase 'You must return' frames his fate as inevitable—an order rather than a dialogue. He is reduced to an object of judicial procedure, moving towards death with no possibility of intervention. The final lines reinforce this erasure and the justice overtaking him by ensuring that he suffers the same fate he inflicted upon Celia—his body being cut and mutilated: 'And your body for your cruel deeds / Must then dissected be'. By silencing Holloway and instead situating his story solely through its consequences—on his wife, on his grieving mother, and public morality—the ballad ensures that he is not remembered as the man in court, confident and composed, but as the embodiment of his crime's aftermath.

However, while the ballad explicitly reviles Holloway, this stance is complicated not only by his prominence in two of the three illustrations, as we have seen, but also by the accompanying prose within the same broadside. The verbal text allows more space for his confession and highlights his attempt to shift the blame onto Ann Kennett:

[He] exerted all his force to strangle her, the poor creature in resisting fell to the bottom of the stairs, where she continued struggling; Holloway with the end of the cord in each hand, called to Ann for assistance, and God knows she assisted me by taking hold of each end of the rope, until the poor girl dropped. I then held the cord myself, and Ann made use of this expression—"Do not let your heart fail you".

This quotation stresses Holloway's wavering resolve through the repetition of the word 'poor' and his portrayal of Ann as the one who urged him to complete the act, both physically, by helping him hold the rope, and verbally, by telling him not to let his heart fail him. In doing so, he attempts to frame her as the instigator or driving force behind the murder, thereby subtly shifting the burden of responsibility away from himself. This reading resonates with the accompanying illustration that

portrays Holloway in outlandish, menacing and animalistic terms. While such imagery might initially appear to condemn him, it simultaneously functions to externalise—or even naturalise—his violence, as though it stems from uncontrollable, bestial impulses rather than calculated intent. Wiener echoes this interpretation. He cites a *Times* article from April 1846 reporting on two wife murders, noting: ‘when we see instances, as we did not very long ago, of femicide being treated in a criminal court as little more than a venial exuberance of animal spirits, we must expect that semi-femicide will experience a proportionate reduction in the severity of the punishment assigned to it’.<sup>48</sup> This language buttresses a masculinised view of violence as an inherent impulse rather than a punishable offence. This framing, in turn, positions violent men as subjects of reform, thereby portraying them as less culpable. Weiner argues that until the end of the eighteenth century, ‘a man had been allowed wide discretion in exercising his proper authority within his household, particularly among his wife and children, and even if such “disciplining” resulted in his wife’s death, criminal charges did not always follow. [. . .] When criminal charges were brought, many ended only in acquittal’.<sup>49</sup> This notion not only contributes to more lenient judicial outcomes but also reveals gendered disparities in how male IPH is perceived and prosecuted, often pathologising their behaviour, shifting accountability onto victims, or attributing their violence to broader social conditions rather than individual responsibility. I consider these dynamics in the following sections.

The broadside depiction of Holloway as animalistic contrasts with the portrait of a mellow and kindly individual published as the frontispiece of *An Authentic and Faithful History* (see Figure 12).<sup>50</sup>

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48. *The Times*, 1846, as quoted in Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 155.

49. Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 150.

50. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, frontispiece.



Figure 12. Frontispiece of *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway*

The original caption beneath the portrait reads: 'A correct likeness, from a Painting executed by Mr. J. Perez, of Brighton, at the particular request of M<sup>rs</sup> Holloway, his Mother, in Horsham Jail',

followed by a handwritten signature: 'John William Holloway', and the note: '☞ THIS IS THE ONLY LIKENESS THAT WILL BE ALLOWED TO BE TAKEN'. The first line declares that the portrait offers the most accurate likeness, while the emphatic capitalisation and the symbolic manicule (☞) preceding the second statement indicate that this is the only authorised portrait.

Nevertheless, the mention of his mother as the one who commissioned the image complicates these assertions. The picture presents Holloway as calm and composed, with childlike softness in his facial features and small, chubby hands. When paired with the maternal framing, this visual presentation

raises the possibility that the editor's inclusion of this caption is strategic, subtly encouraging the viewer to question the objectivity of the portrait. Is this truly Holloway as he was or as his family wished him to be remembered? Together, the visual coding and the two statements in the caption work to restrict rival interpretations and preserve a single, controlled image. This very effort at control is ultimately self-undermining: the claim to authenticity loses credibility when the perpetrator's mother shapes the only authorised likeness. The portrait and its framing prompt scepticism about the visual text and the narrative surrounding it.

This visual claim of authenticity mirrors the rhetorical strategy employed in the opening pages, which position the text itself as authored by Holloway during his incarceration. The 'Editor' claims:

It is from an expectation of the great and beneficial consequences that will result from this lesson, that Holloway himself deposited in the hands of the Editor of this work the history of his own life, written by himself, in his dreary confinement in Horsham Goal, in order that the young may take salutary warning from the awful condition to which he has reduced himself, by the infraction of those holy doctrines, on the basis of which is founded all terrestrial happiness, and the hopes of that which is to come.<sup>51</sup>

The prefatory statement is anchored in the repetition of phrases such as 'Holloway himself', 'his own life', and 'written by himself', underlining the volume's claims to truth. This emphasis, combined with the mention of the mother's role in commissioning the portrait, signifies a carefully calibrated narrative of moral instruction and emotional appeal. However, the word 'Editor' is capitalised throughout the paratext, stressing his authority within the production of the text, yet his identity is never disclosed. This simultaneous elevation and anonymisation of the editorial voice complicate the volume's claim to authenticity. While the narrative is presented as rooted in first-person testimony and maternal legitimacy, the absence of a named editor opens space for readerly contestation. By drawing attention to the mother's and son's involvement in the crafting of visual and verbal texts, the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume invites us to interrogate how guilt, identity,

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51. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 3.

and moral authority are shaped through narrative control. In this way, street literature, as a multidimensional genre, does more than narrate a crime; it negotiates and stages an array of cultural attitudes towards wife-killing.

### **1.2 Reframing Male Guilt and Accountability**

While the previous section examined how the interplay of visual and verbal elements in street literature unsettles the assumption of a singular or dominant representation of wife-killing, this section narrows the focus to an especially charged site of narrative tension: the portrayal of Holloway as a perpetrator of spousal murder and how guilt, culpability, and justification are negotiated through rhetorical strategies and character framing. Rather than presenting him straightforwardly as a man who deliberately unleashed violence against his wife, many accounts engage in rhetorical re-evaluations of Celia herself, employing victim-blaming strategies that undermine her position as an unequivocal casualty of male violence. These narratives frame her as complicit in her fate, questioning her choices, her conduct, and her relationship with Holloway and suggest that the murder was not an act of unprovoked male brutality. Rather it was the tragic culmination of a fraught domestic dynamic. Other accounts indicate Holloway's troubled childhood, financial struggles, and supposed mental afflictions, shifting the focus away from his culpability and toward external forces that may have driven him to kill. In mitigating Holloway's guilt, these narratives reflect contemporary cultural tendencies in the treatment of wife-killing. As law scholars Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson, and Samantha Pegg observe in their discussion of the period 1800 to 1860, 'when it came to individual cases, both public feeling and the attitudes of the criminal justice system meant that there were many prosecutions for domestic violence in which male brutality towards their spouses was mitigated by some contextual factor, as the reportage makes

plain'.<sup>52</sup> Holloway's case, therefore, was not exceptional but part of a broader cultural pattern in which male perpetrators were routinely excused or reframed. This section argues that what is distinctive about street literature is its raw immediacy and its overt contradictions—on the one hand reinforcing hegemonic beliefs that justify or excuse male violence, and on the other challenging such leniency by demanding swift punishment and questioning the possibility of divine mercy for figures like Holloway. These depictions variably shift accountability and blame onto Holloway's accomplice, Ann Kennett; the overseers who forced him to marry; his economic hardship; Celia, the murdered wife; and even psychopathology.

In the broadside 'Horrible Details of the Apprehension, Dreadful Confessions, and Interesting Trial of John William Holloway; for the Murder of His Wife', published shortly after the trial on December 14, 1831, the narrative foregrounds Holloway's confessions by portraying them in an extended, first-person form that occupies a significant portion of the text.<sup>53</sup> Although it is unclear whether these confessions are transcriptions of an actual statement or editorial reconstructions, the prominence and details suggest a crafted narrative voice designed to draw readers into Holloway's perspective. The editorial choice to lead with and elaborate on his supposed words reflects an intent to dramatise his account, lending it the emotional and moral gravity that shapes the reader's interpretation from the outset. In his initial confession, Holloway highlights that he and Celia came from impoverished families and were 'unhappily' married since 1825 when Celia was twenty-six and John was only nineteen. John asserts that 'the overseers compelled him to marry her' because she became pregnant. The mention of their age difference, then the fact that he was compelled to marry

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52. Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson, and Samantha Pegg, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820–2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 35–36, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137317971>.

53. 'Horrible Details of the Apprehension', broadside (1831).

her, sets a narrative tone that implicates Celia, positioning her not simply as a victim but as a participant in her tragic death. He continues that at the start of their marriage, they were content ‘until his wife’s relations took from them some household furniture, which they had given him to induce him to marry her. They did all they could to make him wretched, and his wife did all she could to destroy his peace of mind’. This portrayal manipulates the audience’s perception, suggesting that Celia’s actions and her family’s interference might have contributed to the deterioration of their relationship. He then adds that he left her to live with his lover, Ann Kennett, and they passed as husband and wife for some time before committing the murder. However, the broadside reveals that at the time of her murder, Celia was in the late stages of pregnancy with their third child and that both of her other children had died—one in infancy and the other while still a toddler. Instead of expressing compassion for the victim, the broadside states, ‘[t]hus have two lives been sacrificed to the demon of revenge’. On the surface, this phrase might appear to demonise Holloway himself, framing him as a man possessed by violent passion and responsible for both deaths. Yet the coupling of ‘demon’ with ‘revenge’ complicates such a straightforward moral reading, shifting emphasis from individual agency to an abstract, consuming force. The accompanying focus on Celia’s pregnancy and her continued association with Holloway subtly recasts her as complicit in the tragedy, as though her inability to sever ties enabled the ‘demon’ to act. In this way, even a seemingly direct condemnation of Holloway becomes a vehicle for redistributing blame, turning a moment of supposed moral closure into one that reinforces cultural narratives of female culpability.

As previously discussed, the broadside introduces the case of Ann Aubrey, a female husband-killer, as a counterpoint to Holloway’s murder of his wife. A noteworthy detail is the disparity in their narrative treatment: while Holloway is given ample space to explain himself and his actions, Aubrey is denied such complexity. We view her solely in terms of the diabolical nature of her act, for which she was hanged and burned. This contrast reinforces the gendered distinction in the text’s

moral framing—Holloway is granted ambiguity, while Aubrey becomes a flattened emblem of female wickedness. The gendered dynamics become even more complex when considering the broadside's portrayal of Ann Kennett, Holloway's accomplice. Her role is noticeably downplayed, framed merely as someone who helped dispose of Celia's body: 'with the assistance of Kennett, he conveyed to Margaret-Street, and threw it down the privy'. This version sanitises her involvement, omitting key details found in the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume and other broadsides, where Holloway claims that Kennett played a direct role in the murder. In his confession in the volume, he recounts that Kennett hid in the cupboard under the stairs, and when his 'arms began to ache' during the strangling, he called for her help.<sup>54</sup> She complied, taking one end of the rope to assist him.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, the broadside presents a muted version of her participation. It notes that the jury was instructed to judge her independently of Holloway's confession; though acquitted of the capital charge, she was imprisoned pending indictment. Such discrepancies suggest that the harsher treatment of Aubrey stems not from her deviation from feminine norms but from the specific nature of her crime: killing a husband, then defined legally as 'petit treason'. Kennett's involvement, by contrast, is framed in a way that avoids symbolically breaching patriarchal authority by casting her as abetting a male perpetrator. Her role is depicted as secondary, assisting Holloway rather than acting on her own initiative, which maintains traditional gender hierarchies and spares her the same symbolic transgression that female perpetrators like Ann Aubrey embody. The differing portrayals reveal how women's roles are not simply judged by their actions but by how those actions challenge or uphold dominant power structures.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that even contemporary newspapers offer the same

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54. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 234.

55. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 234.

leniency surrounding Kennett's role.<sup>56</sup> The *Morning Herald*'s decision to dedicate an entire article to her, titled 'The Late Murder at Brighton: (Abridged from the Brighton Herald of Saturday) Re-examination of Ann Kennett', published on September 5, 1831, is striking given that she was neither the victim nor the principal perpetrator.<sup>57</sup> The term 'Re-examination' is especially significant: it implies a narrative reopening of her role in the case; her involvement remains unresolved, unstable, and subject to public judgements. The article presents conflicting witness testimonies, further complicating Ann's culpability. For instance, the article reports that James Simmonds, Celia's landlord, described how Holloway, after giving Celia money, later returned to her house to abuse her. Upon hearing this, Ann Kennett remarked that 'when Holloway had not money to send to Celia, she had often pawned the clothes off her back to get it for her'. This statement introduces Ann as someone who exhibited financial concern for Celia, even at her own expense. Meanwhile, Amelia Simmonds' testimony introduced an allegation that Ann had previously threatened Celia, a claim Ann firmly denied. Such contradictory evidence underscores the newspaper's uncertainty in defining Ann's precise role, mirroring the broadside's reluctance to cast her as an outright perpetrator.

The *Authentic and Faithful History*, published in 1832, after the 'Horrible Details' broadside, builds upon the earlier account by offering a more expansive and structured narrative that develops the broadside's concerns or tropes. As discussed in my introduction to this chapter, the volume mimics the visual and structural components of chapbooks; it opens with a detailed portrayal of Holloway's

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56. See also 'Murder at Brighton', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, August 28, 1831, accessed 21 March 2025, *The British Newspaper Archive*, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000355/18310828/024/0004?browse=False>.

57. 'The Late Murder at Brighton: (Abridged from the *Brighton Herald* of Saturday) Re-examination of Ann Kennett', *Morning Herald* (London), 5 September 1831, accessed 21 March 2025, *The British Newspaper Archive*, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002408/18310905/022/0004?browse=False>.

early life and childhood with his parents, followed by an extended account of his relationship with Celia, including how they married, their life together, their eventual estrangement, and the formation of his relationship with Ann Kennett. It then recounts the events leading up to the murder and includes coverage of the trial proceedings. While much of the narrative is filtered through Holloway's voice, the volume also incorporates transcriptions of legal documents, letters, and trial testimony, all framed and supplemented by editorial commentary. Most notably, it offers insight into what the editor describes as an 'ill sorted marriage' and 'a compulsory marriage, in which love and affection have no voice'. This signifies Holloway's union with Celia after she became pregnant was not the result of personal desire or moral obligation but as an emotionally and legally coerced arrangement.<sup>58</sup> The phrase 'compulsory marriage' casts the union as emotionally intolerable from the outset rather than a voluntary bond, intensified by the claim that, in Holloway's case, 'even a positive degree of dislike exists'.<sup>59</sup> The stakes of this framing are heightened by the assertion that Holloway had 'only one alternative, to consent to be married, or to remain a prisoner for life'.<sup>60</sup> The declaration that 'he chose the former, and the dreadful result will now be disclosed' creates a direct causal link between the forced marriage and the crime that follows, thereby shifting moral responsibility from the perpetrator to the broader institutional structures that compelled his choices.<sup>61</sup> Holloway's narration supports this portrayal. Reflecting on Celia's pregnancy, he recalls:

At last [...] she proved in the family way; she made it known to me, and asked my advice, what she was to do. I told her she had better swear the child at once, and let me be taken up, and I would then marry her. This I well knew was her only desire [...] and for my own part I was so young and foolish, that I thought it an honour to be taken up by the Parish for a bastard child, and therefore never once gave it one thought, that if I married her, whether I should be happy or

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58. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 35-6.

59. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 36.

60. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 36.

61. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 36.

not.<sup>62</sup>

The phrase ‘swear the child to me’ implies that, once Celia did so, Holloway would be arrested and confined unless he consented to marry her. He adds that he willingly asked Celia to ‘swear the child’ to him as an act of ‘honour’, ascribing his actions to ‘youth’ and naivety and emphasising that he ‘never’ thought of his happiness. He claims he was imprisoned as a result. However, this willingness is complicated by the editor’s account of Holloway’s statement:

[T]he banns of marriage were published by the overseers of Ardingly previously to his liberation from Lewes jail. Mrs. Holloway [John Holloway’s mother] states, that they were published without his knowledge at all; and further, that the overseers actually took him in a state of intoxication to the marriage altar; in either case, the overseers were exceeding not only the limits of the law, but the bounds of their authority.<sup>63</sup>

This passage directly undermines the legitimacy of his marriage to Celia and introduces a bizarre contradiction in Holloway’s willingness to marry Celia, which the narrative eventually reveals in full. The phrase ‘without his knowledge at all’ stresses Holloway’s apparent lack of agency. The inclusion of ‘at all’ serves to underscore Holloway’s ignorance and lack of control. The claim that ‘the overseers actually took him in a state of intoxication to the marriage altar’ further dramatises this lack of agency, presenting Holloway as physically and mentally incapacitated. The adverb ‘actually’ conveys incredulity, framing the act as shocking and unjust. The passage ends with an assertion that ‘the overseers were exceeding not only the limits of the law, but the bounds of their authority’. The repetition in this parallel structure underlines the critique of the overseers’ actions, which constitute a legal transgression and a moral overstep.

This narrative thread intensifies as the *Authentic and Faithful History* moves beyond Holloway’s and his mother’s testimony and culminates in the editor’s closing declaration: ‘[w]e have thus expatiated

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62. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 36.

63. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 43-44.

on the marriage of Holloway, as from it may be dated the horrible act which will be recorded in these pages'.<sup>64</sup> Although the editor insists that they do not mean to offer this coercion as 'even the slightest hue of palliation', the structure and tone of the passage effectively do just that. The repeated conditional clauses—'if the overseers [...] had confined themselves', 'if they had not', and 'if the promises had been performed'—contribute to the rhetorical force of its conclusion: that had the marriage not been forced, 'a mother and her child would now be living, and a murder less to be recorded in the annals of human guilt'.<sup>65</sup> By packaging this as a reasoned deduction, *An Authentic and Faithful History* constructs a direct causal link between the coerced marriage and the murder, thereby relocating moral responsibility onto the structural failings of the parish authorities rather than Holloway alone.

This closing declaration suggests that the discussion of marriage and paternity is complete. However, there is a disturbing disclosure only a few pages later. 'Holloway was aware that he was not the only person who had attempted to ingratiate himself with Celia, and his mind was not wholly free from suspicion, as will afterwards appear, that he was not the real father of the child with which she was pregnant'.<sup>66</sup> Holloway's suspicions are corroborated by the editor, who states that Celia confessed this information to Holloway's 'nearest relative', who testified that 'Celia actually confessed that Goldsmith was the father of the child; but on Holloway coming forward, and promising to marry her if she would swear the child to him, she hesitated not a moment, and the consequences have been already related'.<sup>67</sup> This delayed revelation foregrounds the sense of betrayal,

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64. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 45.

65. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 45-46.

66. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 44.

67. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 49.

positioning Holloway as socially and legally trapped and personally deceived while casting doubt on the sincerity of his original intentions, which are only revealed later. His proposal is described as an emotional experiment to test Celia's reactions:

The promise of marriage was therefore, perhaps, given experimentally on his part, to try whether she would in reality swear the child to him, little dreaming that she would take him so readily at his word, and call upon him so promptly to fulfil his promise.<sup>68</sup>

This retrospective framing helps to explain the contradiction between Holloway's initial assertion that he urged Celia to swear the child to him as an act of honour and his later claim that he was unaware of the marriage banns and had been taken to the altar while unconscious from intoxication. His proposal is no longer seen as dignified self-sacrifice or youthful foolishness but rather as a deliberate test of loyalty—one he never expected Celia to take seriously. However, the language of 'experimentally' and 'little dreaming' positions him as both naïve and blameless while transferring the full burden of blame onto Celia, who is depicted as overly eager, even shameless in holding him to his word despite knowing that he was not the child's father. This rhetorical framing chimes with the volume's broader strategy of displacing accountability, portraying Holloway as a man caught in a chain of misunderstandings, unintended consequences, and external pressures. Within the legal context of the time, such an account aligns with the doctrine of provocation, which allowed men to claim reduced culpability for violent acts, particularly wife-murder, if they were believed to have been provoked by emotional shock, primarily through perceived sexual betrayal.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the narrative reflects Holloway's internal conflict and reinforces a wider cultural logic that mitigated male violence by defining it as reactive rather than deliberate.

Through these narrative manoeuvres, the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume fashions a layered

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68. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 44.

69. A. J. Ashworth, 'The Doctrine of Provocation', *The Cambridge Law Journal* 35, no. 2 (1976): 292–320, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008197300012046>.

portrayal in which Holloway emerges as both the subject and victim of a broken system while simultaneously recasting Celia as the agent of her undoing—someone who does not ‘hesitate’ to deceive. Her decision to falsely attribute paternity is coded as manipulative and self-serving, while Holloway’s repeated offers to marry her are depicted as tragically honourable or callow misjudgements. In combination with the earlier stress on coerced marriage, this anecdote further delegitimises Celia’s role as wife and moves the moral focus away from domestic violence. The result is a narrative that subtly exonerates the male murderer through a reconfiguration of blame that relies heavily on discrediting the female victim. The moral weight of his eventual crime is thus re-visioned not as the product of inherent brutality but as the culmination of prolonged coercion, manipulation, and institutional complicity.

Following this coerced union, Holloway was effectively abandoned, receiving none of the promised support from the ‘overseers of Ardingly’.<sup>70</sup> His first fourteen days as a husband were spent in destitution, with officials who ‘charitably and officially conveyed [him]’, not as a man newly entrusted with familial responsibility, but as ‘the burden from which they had so disgracefully disengaged themselves’.<sup>71</sup> The coercion and deception that marked Holloway and Celia’s union did not end at the altar; as Holloway recounts in his conversation with the editor about ‘the first separation’, such experiences laid the foundation for the discord that would characterise their married life.<sup>72</sup> Holloway, as the speaker, artfully but persistently shifts blame onto Celia, who is chiefly responsible for their marital breakdown. While he admits to an extra-marital affair with ‘Maria Burke’, a teenage girl he describes as ‘rather a handsome young woman, very free, and withal

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70. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 46.

71. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 46.

72. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 49.

very enticing, giving liberty as far as I chose to take it', he begins by explaining that Celia was 'confined to her bed', perhaps due to pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>73</sup> Holloway admits that Celia had no one else to nurse her, and he is the one who proposed 'if she [Maria] was agreeable, for her to stop and nurse my wife, if she had no objection to fare as we did'.<sup>74</sup> However, despite being the one to invite Maria into their home, he situates the ailing Celia as the one who facilitated the transgression by agreeing to the plan and even welcoming it: '[M]y wife said she was very happy that Maria Burke had agreed to stop with her; but it was not long before she saw the evil of it'.<sup>75</sup> By portraying Celia's consent as a kind of moral failure, Holloway deflects attention from his role in introducing temptation into their domestic space. He even claims Celia enabled his misconduct by helping him dress: 'Celia and Maria Burke dressed me [ . . . ] Now, if Celia had disapproved of it, why not have shown her disapprobation then [ . . . ] and not [ . . . ] go behind my back?'.<sup>76</sup> Though he confesses that 'things [ . . . ] came to a very improper pass', he casts himself as a passive, youthful victim, 'not quite twenty' and 'placed in the midst of temptation', while using a seemingly sincere confessional tone, 'believe me, I mean the truth should appear on both sides', to mask a calculated strategy of self-exoneration.<sup>77</sup> In his account, Celia is the one responsible due to her alleged negligence during her pregnancy, even though he had set this chain of events in motion and freely admits that 'I loved every young woman that I saw, yet never satisfied'.<sup>78</sup>

Following this event, Holloway recounts another incident in which he had a financial

73. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 50, 51.

74. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 50.

75. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 50.

76. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 51.

77. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 50-51, 52.

78. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 51.

disagreement with Celia and her family. He spent money given to him by her brother to support their newlywed life on alcohol, which ultimately led to their separation and Celia leaving him.<sup>79</sup> This account is later undermined when the chapbook reveals that Holloway's version of events is both distorted and chronologically disordered in a way that benefits him. According to Holloway's narrative, the sequence is as follows: first, his infidelity with Maria Burke; second, the money dispute with Celia's brother; and finally, Celia's leaving the home with her brother. Yet later he himself contradicts this account: '[S]ome time before Celia was confined, we being very short of money, as I had no work, I asked her if she could not get a little money from some of her friends'.<sup>80</sup> This suggests that the financial betrayal actually occurred earlier, prior to Celia's confinement to bed rest. The volume also reveals that, in his murder confession to the magistrate—made before his collaboration with the editor—Holloway admits that he was the one who left her.<sup>81</sup> However, although the volume lays bare these contradictions in Holloway's account, the editor nevertheless extends him a degree of sympathy. Rather than confronting the clear evidence of narrative manipulation and infidelity, the editor argues that 'the mere circumstance of his spending the money which the family of Celia had lent Holloway could not be adduced as a plea on which to ground their separation'—a position that dismisses a legally valid cause for separation.<sup>82</sup> In doing so, the editor not only sidesteps the gravity of Holloway's adultery but also reinforces a more palatable, financial explanation. This selective framing effectively shields Holloway from moral censure and

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79. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 53-54.

80. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 52.

81. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 189.

82. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 55. According to Lawrence Stone, adultery at the time constituted legal grounds for 'separation from bed and board, which could be granted on grounds of either cruelty or adultery or both'. See Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660-1857* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198202547.001.0001>.

redirects attention away from the more damning aspects of his conduct.

After the separation, Holloway claims that he moved around for a while, searching for stable employment. He states, '[i]n this situation, taking one time with another, I did very well for several months, until Celia found out where I was, and went immediately to the parish for assistance; consequently they came and took me into custody'.<sup>83</sup> Once again, Celia's actions are, as Holloway suggests, the source of disruption and personal misfortune. He is a man trying to rebuild his life, only to be undermined by a vindictive wife and an interfering system. Following this confrontation, Holloway claims that he made a formal agreement, signed by both parties and witnessed by William Vinson, to avoid being thrown 'into prison'.<sup>84</sup> According to Holloway's narration, the agreement reads as follows:

I, Celia Holloway, do hereby agree never to interfere with John William Holloway in any manner whatsoever, nor neither do I wish to live with him, nor to hinder him from living with any one that he may think proper to live with, so long as he continue to pay or cause to be paid to me weekly, the sum of two shillings, to be paid every Saturday, commencing from the 15th June, 1831.<sup>85</sup>

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83. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 100.

84. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 102.

85. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 102.

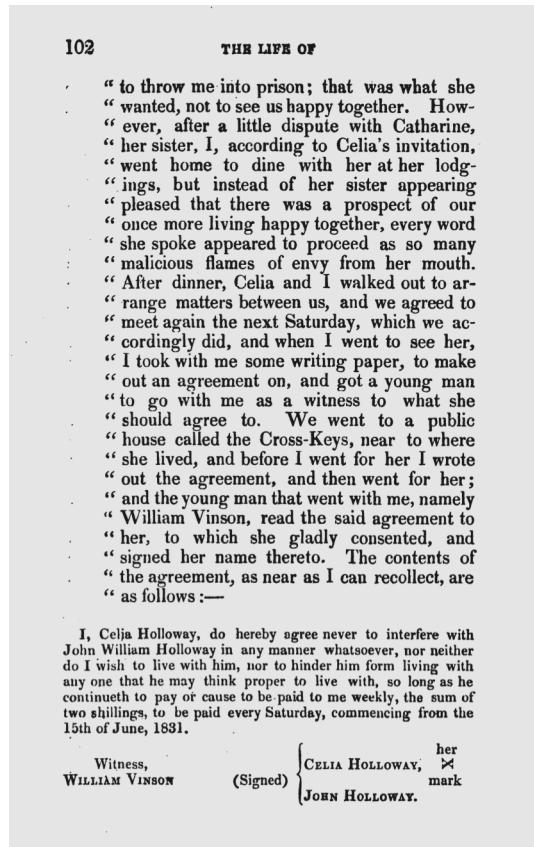


Figure 13. Legal agreement between Holloway and Celia as narrated by Holloway.

In Figure 13, the agreement's typography, visual layout, and overall design create a sense of legal objectivity despite the agreement being drawn entirely from Holloway's account of events. It is introduced with his qualifier, 'as I recall', and is not a direct transcript. The visual representation of the supposed marriage diverges from the surrounding text, which features quotation marks before each line. This agreement appears in a different font and layout, with widened margins and a structured format that visually imitates a formal legal document. This illusion of authenticity is bolstered by the phrasing of the agreement, narrated in the first person by 'I, Celia' as if voiced by her. This narration implies that she endorses Holloway's account, reinforcing his authority while erasing her perspective. It is also supported by the inclusion of the word 'signed' centred beneath the text, with the witness's name positioned to the left and an open bracket on the right enclosing the names of both parties. Celia Holloway's name appears alongside the phrase 'her X mark', hinting

at her limited literacy. These elements lend a performative credibility to Holloway's version of events. Just as the parish had previously compelled him to marry Celia, it is now shown to be pursuing him for financial support, painting Holloway less as a perpetrator and more as someone repeatedly bullied and beleaguered by legal and social forces. This agreement becomes even more unsettling given that Celia is murdered less than a month later, on 14 July 1831.<sup>86</sup>

Following the agreement, Holloway claims he immediately paid her the two shillings.<sup>87</sup> However, his account presents Celia not as a wronged wife seeking support but as financially opportunistic, reducing her requests to a calculated transaction. He states:

She received the money with every mark of satisfaction, drank a glass of beer, and bade me good night, yet at the same time remarking, that she thought it would be much more satisfactory to her sister to live apart than other ways, for but very few of her relations wished her to have anything to do with me.<sup>88</sup>

While Celia appears content, her suggestion, citing her sister's wishes and the disapproval of her relatives, indirectly pressures Holloway to provide her with separate lodging. Holloway, wary of being further entangled, responds, 'I am happy to hear it, and hope, now they have got what they wanted, that they will be content, and that there will be no more parish work'.<sup>89</sup> His use of 'they' groups Celia with her sister and broader kin as a single manipulative force, while his reference to 'parish work' suggests anxiety about being burdened with more institutional obligations. In response, Celia states that she 'should not have gone to the parish then, had it not been for the persuasion of her sister'.<sup>90</sup> This exchange, along with the earlier account of her silent compliance when her brother

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86. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 253.

87. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

88. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

89. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

90. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

removed her from Holloway, paints Celia either as weak-willed and easily influenced by her relatives or as coldly calculating—someone who, as Holloway notes earlier, accepted his payments with ‘every mark of satisfaction’, as if enjoying the spectacle of his downfall.<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, both of these conflicting portrayals of Celia are narrated by Holloway. He seems to exploit every opportunity to serve the same purpose: casting Celia as culpable and himself as a victim.

Following this exchange, Holloway stated that he had paid the agreed sum over the next two weeks. In the third week, however, he struggled to find the full amount, so he paid her part and promised to return with the rest.<sup>92</sup> During this return visit, he makes a startling revelation that complicates the narrative’s portrayal of Celia. The previous interaction implies that Celia was living with her sister at the time, an arrangement that appears to trouble both her family and Holloway himself. In his return visit, he claims that he arrived earlier than promised and is told by one of the children, presumably his sister-in-law’s, that Celia is not home. When he enters, he finds the two children sitting and asks them about Celia. However, their story quickly becomes confusing, shifting from ‘she just went out’ to ‘I saw her go down the hill’ and then to the claim that their ‘father said so’. Holloway is perplexed by the inconsistencies in their account and asks whether their father is at home. They reply, ‘No’. He then leaves, but before he gets far from the house, is called back:

I had not got far, when the child came running after me, and said that Celia wanted me. I asked, where is she? She answered, up stairs. I said, I thought you said she was gone out. The child (it appeared to me was not naturally given to lying, and therefore, forgetting herself) said, Father told me to say so. I then asked, Where is your father? she answered, Up stairs. I then further asked, Who sent you after me? she said, When you was gone, father came to the top of the stairs and asked who was at the door just now? I told him you was, and then he told Celia to shake up the bed, and told me to go and call you back.<sup>93</sup>

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91. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

92. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 103.

93. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 104.

Confused, Holloway returns to the house. Notably, the first exchange between Holloway and the child, 'where is she?' and her answer, 'up stairs', is rendered in lowercase, giving the interaction an informal or unremarkable tone. However, when Holloway asks, 'Where is your father?' and receives the identical answer 'Up stairs', both question and response are capitalised. This typographic shift aligns with a growing narrative suspicion: what initially seemed mundane becomes laden with implication. The capitalised 'Up stairs' now marks not just a location, but a space of implied secrecy, co-presence, and potential wrongdoing. Upon re-entering, he briefly sees the man, referred to only as 'the father', and then finds Celia upstairs, flustered, red-faced, and making the bed. Holloway doubts her explanation that she was lying down because she felt sleepy, since he notes she appeared to have been 'pulled about very much by someone'.<sup>94</sup> The detail that Celia is living with her sister, combined with the presence of a man implicitly identified as the sister's husband, suggests an illicit relationship and a betrayal not only of Holloway but also of family ties. The text never explicitly states that Celia was sleeping with her sister's husband. Still, this insinuation is built through the accumulation of clues—the deception, the timing, the bed, her blushing, and the child's testimony. The editorial intrusion following Holloway's statement, 'we must, from a sense of delicacy, omit the sequel', amplifies the scandal while withholding detail, encouraging readers to assume the worst without requiring the narrative to state it outright.<sup>95</sup> Through this framing, the text justifies Holloway's actions by recasting Celia from blameless victim to a cheat, and an emotional aggressor.

After portraying Celia, her family, and the parish as responsible for making Holloway's life unliveable and ultimately driving him to break and kill her, the text adopts another tactic: if Celia and the others are not to blame, and Holloway is solely responsible, then Celia, as a woman, should have

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94. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 104.

95. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 104.

known better and taken steps to protect herself from him. This framing becomes evident when Holloway confesses:

He had asked her repeatedly to go out with him, but she always refused to accompany him from her lodgings after dark. When all his efforts to get her out to some secret spot, where he could despatch her, failed, he resolved upon taking an obscure house in Donkey-row, and, under pretencce [sic] of living again with her there, to inveigle her to that place, and put her to death.<sup>96</sup>

Her refusal or reluctance to accompany him ‘after dark’ suggests a strong distrust of his motives. By creating this elaborate deception—renting a house in ‘Donkey Row’ to mislead her—he seems intent on crafting a narrative that she was fully aware of his harmful intentions. He even adds that Celia’s worries persisted after she agreed to live with him again: ‘She appeared rather uneasy to know where I was going to take her clothes to’.<sup>97</sup> Despite these concerns, she followed him. More disturbingly, Holloway also includes an anecdote about another woman he attempted to assault sexually. In this narrative, he describes trying to lure a young woman under false pretences. By claiming that she appeared ‘easy to be persuaded’ and showed ‘no objections’, Holloway implies that her willingness justified his intentions.<sup>98</sup> When the young woman ‘shows sign of alarm, which caused [him] to desist’,<sup>99</sup> and later ‘boldly told me, that before she would comply with my wishes she would jump overboard’, Holloway claims he was ‘so confounded’ that he ‘immediately acknowledged myself in fault to her’ and ‘felt so much ashamed for what I had done, that I could not look her in the face’.<sup>100</sup> Throughout his narration, he delivers what resembles a soliloquy—a lengthy, philosophical reflection couched as advice to women, in which he reproaches the woman’s

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96. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 189.

97. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 130.

98. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 116.

99. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 115.

100. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 120.

behaviour: first, for trusting him despite only knowing him for ‘a few days’, and second, for continuing with him to the house when, in his words, she ‘could plainly see, from what passed, that my design was not honourable’.<sup>101</sup> He also condemns women who ‘suffer themselves to be led away so easily’, asserting that ‘they ruin themselves’ and are ‘as much to be blamed or more than the man that say ruined them’.<sup>102</sup> He concludes by addressing his ‘dear female readers’, insisting that ‘prudent behaviour’ can ‘influence even the most vile and wicked libertine in the world’.<sup>103</sup> In doing so, Holloway evokes female modesty as a powerful force capable of reforming even the most dissolute men while simultaneously burdening women with responsibility for male misconduct. His phrasing shifts blame away from men and reinforces the idea that women’s virtue alone must uphold moral order.

On cursory view, this secondary account in Holloway’s confession may appear extraneous or even self-incriminating. However, his concluding reflection on ‘such women’, along with the fact that this story is told immediately before Holloway recounts how Celia went with him willingly on the day of her murder, reveals a calculated attempt to establish a precedent that reframes Celia’s case along similar lines. Despite the editor’s insertion of several letters from Holloway to others between the two narratives, accompanied by his commentary on them, the editor’s statement when resuming Holloway’s narrative of the events on the day of the murder—‘We resume the narrative where Holloway relates the failure of his attempt upon the virtue of the young woman, whom he had taken out to sea in his boat’—asserts that Holloway originally recounted both events together.<sup>104</sup> After the

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101. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 116.

102. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 116.

103. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 120.

104. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 129.

opening statement, Holloway immediately states, 'In the course of that same day', he continues, 'I again went up to Celia, and told her to hold herself in readiness to go with me', suggesting a deliberate effort to draw a parallel between the two women. In doing so, Holloway implies that both incidents happened on the same day, but while one woman survived the attack, Celia did not. By recounting a situation in which another woman avoided harm by remaining alert and resisting his advances, Holloway creates a contrast with Celia, who, deceived by his lie that someone was inside the rented house, entered willingly with her belongings and failed to ask her sister to wait. This moment is depicted as creating the opportunity for Holloway to kill her, thus shifting responsibility onto Celia and deflecting blame away from himself.

This editorial manoeuvre, while it appears to distract the reader from discovering Holloway's manipulation, is problematised by the editor's commentary on his letters. The editors expose a profound inconsistency in Holloway's self-presentation. This inconsistency will be elaborated in the following section by revealing the dissonance between his claimed 'shame' after attempting to assault a young girl, whom he let go, and his decision, later that same day, to carry out the premeditated murder of Celia.<sup>105</sup> This contradiction undermines the emotional authenticity Holloway seeks to project, casting doubt over the narrative of repentance he constructs. Significantly, the editorial voice itself undergoes a shift: whereas earlier parts of the *Authentic and Faithful History* appear to support, or at least sympathetically present, Holloway's repentance, the commentary on the letters introduces a tone of scepticism, making the underlying dissonance within the volume increasingly visible. The editor explicitly presents Holloway's actions as beyond ordinary human failing, describing him as 'the perpetrator of an act more dreadful than that of Cain itself' and decrying the way Holloway dares to 'flatter himself with the expectation of pardon and mercy from his God',

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105. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 129.

speaking of 'his entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, amongst the just and good' as something 'accompanied with scarcely a shadow of doubt'.<sup>106</sup> This editorial intervention reveals a dissonant, unstable, and subjective narrative that shifts constantly within the text itself, a characteristic diversity in street literature that will become more apparent as this thesis progresses.

Although the editor highlights Holloway's narrative inconsistency, he remains silent on Holloway's claims that place blame on Celia and suggest that women are responsible for protecting themselves. By not challenging these views—despite giving Holloway ample space to articulate them—*An Authentic and Faithful History* reinforces a pattern of scrutinising female victims while overlooking the misconduct of male perpetrators. This alignment with Holloway is further complicated by the fact that, in the opening lines of the volume, Holloway admits to a professional connection with the publisher. After his separation from Celia, he 'took up bookselling for Mr. Nute',<sup>107</sup> the publisher of the very volume in which this sympathetic editorial voice appears. This connection implies a personal or financial affinity between the editor and Holloway, potentially influencing the volume's sympathetic framing.

This rhetorical strategy reflects broader cultural tendencies towards misogynistic victim-blaming, particularly in cases of sexual violence. The editor reproduces entrenched societal double standards by allowing Holloway's beliefs about female culpability to stand largely unchallenged. While the 1828 Assault Act marked a significant legal acknowledgement of violence, *An Authentic and Faithful History*, published only four years later, reveals a continued reluctance to hold men fully accountable in cases of IP murder. Despite this legal shift, the volume privileges the male voice and implicitly aligns with Holloway's justifications. As such, his chronicle is shaped by a culture that excuses male violence

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106. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 127.

107. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 49.

and blames female victims. For example, Mary Hays's novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), critiques these enduring biases decades earlier. Her narrator, a young woman ruined by sexual assault and subsequent social ostracism, declares, 'The victim of a barbarous prejudice, society has cast me out from its bosom', directly naming the social forces that exclude and shame women.<sup>108</sup> She mourns the emotional and intellectual cost of this exclusion: 'The sensibilities of my heart have been turned to bitterness, the powers of my mind wasted', and insists that her suffering should stir 'the sacred claims of humanity and justice'. Hays then directly targets the hypocrisy of men who impose moral restrictions on women while disregarding the male perpetrators' conduct: 'while the slave of sensuality [...] he pours, by his conduct, contempt upon chastity'.<sup>109</sup> Hays's stance, however, was not isolated: it forms part of a wider late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century critique of patriarchal double standards, evident in both radical works and moral tracts such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) and Mary Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), and in essays within contemporary periodicals.<sup>110</sup> These critiques circulated among literate readers and demonstrate that

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108. Mary Hays, *The Victim of Prejudice* (London, 1799), 231-2, ProQuest, accessed 17 April 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/victim-prejudice/docview/2138576923/se-2>.

109. Hays, *The Victim of Prejudice*, 231-2.

110. This critique continued into the early nineteenth century, as reflected in the republication of Anna Letitia Barbauld's poem 'The Rights of Woman' in *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld* (1825), which revisits earlier debates about women's moral and emotional authority within the evolving discourse of female virtue and public agency. Similar discussions appeared in essays such as 'The Rights of Woman' in *The Literary Tablet* (1804), *The Portsmouth Weekly Magazine* (1824), and *The Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* (1829). Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'The Rights of Woman', in *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), 185-87, ProQuest, accessed 26 October 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/rights-woman/docview/2148024088/se-2?accountid=14540>; M. Warner, 'Literary Tablet; Rights of Woman', *The Literary Tablet; or, a General Repository of Useful Entertainment; Consisting of Essays Original and Selected, in Poetry and Prose* (1803-1807), September 19, 1804, 4, ProQuest, accessed 26 October 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/literary-tablet/docview/89471573/se-2>; 'The Rights of Woman', *The Portsmouth Weekly Magazine; a Repository of Miscellaneous Literary Matters in Prose and Verse* (1824-1825), October 28, 1824, 2, ProQuest, accessed 26

scepticism toward male authority and sympathy for women's victimisation was present in the cultural landscape. Against this backdrop, *An Authentic and Faithful History* aligns itself with the opposite tendency, privileging the male voice and perpetuating the very prejudices writers like Hays sought to expose.

These narrative strategies of blame displacement and gendered distortion pave the way for another powerful rhetorical tool used to excuse male perpetrators: psychological disturbance. The following section explores how street literature constructs an alternative framework of exculpation—male madness. Situating Holloway's portrayal within nineteenth-century medico-legal discourses such as moral insanity and phrenology, the discussion considers how mental 'derangement' operates not merely as a cause of violence or a mitigating factor but as a cultural language through which male brutality is interpreted, justified, or contested.

### 1.3 Male Pathology

In nineteenth-century Britain, the use of psychological disturbance as a mitigating factor was increasingly visible in legal defences such as temporary insanity, provocation, or emotional distress. Such defences often resulted in reduced sentences or more lenient judicial outcomes.<sup>111</sup> A key development in this context was the Criminal Lunatics Act of 1800, the first of several significant

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October 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/rights-woman/docview/137697981/se-2>; N., 'Rights of Women', *The Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* (1828–1829), March 5, 1829, 77, ProQuest, accessed 26 October 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/rights-women/docview/126943351/se-2>; see also 'The Rights of Women: A Dialogue', *The Weekly Magazine of Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence* (Philadelphia), vol. 1, no. 8 (24 March 1798): 231, ProQuest, accessed 15 October 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/rights-women/docview/88895534/se-2>.

111. Catherine L. Evans, 'At Her Majesty's Pleasure: Criminal Insanity in 19th-Century Britain', *History Compass* 14, no. 10 (2016): 472, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12355>.

legal reforms concerning mental health and criminal responsibility, passed following the attempted assassination of King George III by James Hadfield, who was found not guilty by reason of insanity.<sup>112</sup> The act mandated that individuals found criminally insane, whether at the time of the offence or unfit to stand trial, be detained ‘at His Majesty’s pleasure’, effectively allowing for indefinite institutionalisation.<sup>113</sup> This was followed by a series of Acts addressing insanity in both the judicial and civil life.<sup>114</sup> The Lunacy Act of 1828 helped to consolidate madness as a publicly recognisable legal and medical category.<sup>115</sup> Such legislation introduced formal procedures for the classification and institutionalisation of civil lunatics, reinforcing the idea that madness could be officially identified, documented, and managed. These developments brought psychiatric discourse into public consciousness, shaping the imaginative vocabulary available to nineteenth-century writers and readers alike. As critic Valerie Pedlar notes of the period, ‘[i]maginative representations of madness are inevitably influenced by cultural conceptions of insanity, whether they are medical, juridical, philosophical, or a composite that has entered into popular currency’.<sup>116</sup> Pedlar highlights how literary depictions of madness were deeply rooted in—and shaped by—the evolving frameworks through which society understood mental illness.

As will be seen in this section, Holloway’s representation in street literature appears to align with

112. UK Parliament, Criminal Lunatics Act 1800, *Historic Hansard*, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/c#Criminal%20Lunatics%20Act> (accessed April 27, 2025).

113. Thomas Bewley, ‘Important legal cases of the 19th century – James Hadfield’, in *Madness to Mental Illness: A History of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, Online archive 17 (Royal College of Psychiatrists), accessed 2 March 2025, <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/about-us/library-archives/archives/madness-to-mental-illness-online-archive/important-legal-cases-of-the-19th-century-james-hadfield.pdf>.

114. UK Parliament, Criminal Lunatics Act 1800.

115. UK Parliament, HC Deb 19 February 1828, vol. 18, cols. 313–314, *Historic Hansard*, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1828/feb/19/lunatic-asylums> (accessed 1 May 2025).

116. Valerie Pedlar, *The Most Dreadful Visitation: Male Madness in Victorian Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 1, <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/34588/398847.pdf>.

the model proposed by French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel, who 'laid the conceptual groundwork for a new understanding of crime as a mental disease'.<sup>117</sup> Pinel's definition of maniacal insanity—described as 'the commonest form of alienation, is distinguished by nervous excitation or extreme agitation which sometimes develops into fury'.<sup>118</sup> He argues that passions, such as anger, terror, sorrow, and irritation, can lead to mental alienation if they reach an extreme level of intensity. This mental alienation can cause a series of physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, loss of muscle strength, pale face, heavy breathing, crying, drowsiness, a state of dull daze or most importantly, a fit of a very violent delirium.<sup>119</sup> He adds that it might 'develop out of the blue or come on insidiously, and it has its various periods of intensity, decline and of convalescence provided its progress is not derailed'.<sup>120</sup>

Building on Pinel's findings, James Cowles Prichard introduced the diagnosis of 'moral insanity' in his *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835).<sup>121</sup> He defined this condition as a disorder affecting the person's feelings without necessarily impairing their rational capacities. According to Prichard, the insane 'labouring under this disorder are capable of reasoning or supporting an argument upon any subject within their sphere of knowledge that may be presented to them; and they often display great ingenuity in giving reasons for the eccentricities of their conduct,

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117. Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 75.

118. Philippe Pinel, *Medico-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation: Second Edition, Entirely Reworked and Extensively Expanded* (1809), trans. Louis Charland, David Healy, and Gordon Hickish (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 55.

119. Pinel, *Medico-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation*, 11.

120. Pinel, *Medico-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation*, 55.

121. Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, 75, situates Prichard's diagnosis of 'moral insanity' in the context of earlier psychiatric developments such as Pinel's work.

and in accounting for and justifying the state of moral feeling under which they appear to exist'.<sup>122</sup>

Crucially, he claims that 'the insane conceive an aversion for those persons who are most dear to them, revile them, ill-treat them, anxiously shun them, in consequence of their mistrust, their suspicions, and their fears'.<sup>123</sup> The cause for such a condition could be heredity or misfortune, like losing loved ones or a physical cause, such as epilepsy or an inflammatory disorder.<sup>124</sup> Prichard's stress on 'eccentricities' of 'conduct' also hints at a psychic fragmentation that is both reflected and enacted in the depiction of Holloway.<sup>125</sup>

The emergence of moral insanity as a medical-psychiatric category in the nineteenth century developed alongside phrenology, a pseudoscientific theory that attributed human characteristics such as aggression, benevolence, and self-control to distinct, localised faculties of the brain.<sup>126</sup> One of the most influential figures in British phrenology was George Combe, the leading propagator of the movement.<sup>127</sup> In *The Constitution of Man* (1828), Combe argued that the phrenological theory of human nature divides the mind into animal propensities (like 'Destructiveness' or 'Combativeness'), shared sentiments (such as 'Cautiousness'), higher sentiments unique to humans (like 'Benevolence' or 'Conscientiousness'), and the intellect. Each faculty is associated with a specific part of the brain and has its own function and influence on behaviour, and moral and social harmony depends on the

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122. James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1835), 13-14.

123. Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity*, 15.

124. Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity*, 13-15.

125. Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity*, 13-15; for more, see Jean Etienne Dominique Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity*, trans. Ebenezer Kingsbury Hunt (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845).

126. Valerie Pedlar, 'J. C. Prichard's Concept of Moral Insanity: A Medical Theory of the Corruption of Human Nature', *Medical History* 44, no. 3 (2000): 343-364, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300061329>.

127. Paul A. Erickson, 'Phrenology and Physical Anthropology: The George Combe Connection', *Current Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (1977): 92-93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741226>.

higher faculties regulating the lower, more instinctive impulses.<sup>128</sup> When this balance is lost, destructive or immoral behaviour can result. Faculties such as 'Combativeness' and 'Destructiveness', though necessary for survival, become dangerous if not restrained by intellect and higher moral sentiments.<sup>129</sup> In the context of criminal madness, phrenology suggests that overactive or unregulated faculties could lead to violent or destructive behaviour.

Within this broader context, the depictions of Holloway in street literature align with the emerging figure of the unstable male offender, whose extreme violence is reimagined as the product of inner turmoil or possible madness rather than pure malice, and the critic Elizabeth Fay Stearns demonstrates how these shifting discourses filtered into popular literature. Writing about theories and representations of criminality in popular culture in the 1830s and 1840s England, she argues that '[a]ssumptions that criminality was volitional, or that it originated in an individual's deficient self-discipline, gradually shifted into perceptions that criminality was pathological, and that malefactors were naturally brutish and incorrigible'.<sup>130</sup>

This tendency to depict Holloway as mad, despite the absence of any formal insanity defence, can be read as a narrative strategy designed either to sensationalise his brutal crime for public consumption or to invoke madness as a familiar mitigating factor in cases of wife-killing. By framing Holloway within the discourse of insanity, the texts draw on the popular fascination with criminal lunacy, blurring the boundaries between moral accountability and mental instability. Contemporary critics already recognised this sensational framing. Writing in 1875, Charles Hindley—a bookseller,

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128. George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, Jun., and London: Longman & Co., 1828), 40.

129. Combe, *The Constitution of Man*, 45.

130. Elizabeth Fay Stearns, *Jailbreakers, Villains, and Vampires: Representations of Criminality in Early Victorian Popular Texts* (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2013), abstract, [https://surface.syr.edu/eng\\_etd/63](https://surface.syr.edu/eng_etd/63).

printer, and editor best known for compiling and reprinting collections of nineteenth-century street literature—reflects on the enduring cultural impact of the case,<sup>131</sup> stating: ‘It may be emphatically said of it that it was “Most foul, strange, and unnatural”’.<sup>132</sup> The Shakespearean cadence from *Hamlet*, a play preoccupied with madness, guilt, and spectral returns, casts Holloway’s crime in a Gothic register that is morally unsettling and theatrically charged. While Hindley does not directly address Holloway’s mental state, the invocation of *Hamlet* frames him within a broader literary tradition of male psychopathology, one characterised not by incoherence alone but by moral ambiguity, performative reasoning, and mental fragmentation. Like Shakespeare’s prince, Holloway appears both aware and unbalanced, inhabiting a discursive space where confession, guilt, and mental disturbance blur and whose madness, to this day, remains provocatively unresolved. More recently, Wiener has argued that ‘most wife-murderers did not quite make the perfect villains of melodrama that Holloway did’,<sup>133</sup> pointing to this character’s unusual depth and ambiguity. His story resists neat moral categorisation, combining brutality with moments of quiet reflection, madness, and spiritual longing. Holloway emerges as an enigmatic figure whose narrative power lies in the very contradictions that both fascinated and disturbed his contemporaries.

This internal split is echoed in Holloway’s narrative in *An Authentic and Faithful History*. As the previous section shows, the text is shaped by a persistent tension between two narrative voices: Holloway himself and the editor who frames and comments on his story. These competing

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131. Charles Hindley, ed., *Curiosities of Street Literature: Comprising “Cocks”, or “Catchpennies”, a Large and Curious Assortment of Street-Drolleries, Squibs, Dialogues, Songs, Stories, etc.* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1871), Internet Archive, accessed 17 May 2025, <https://archive.org/details/curiositiesofstr00hinduoft>.

132. Charles Hindley, ed., *The Brighton Murder: An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway* (Brighton: Curtis Bros. and Towner, *Brighton Gazette*, 1875), 1, accessed 1 May 2025, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002581837q&seq=15>

133. Wiener, ‘Alice Arden to Bill Sikes’, 209.

perspectives generate a layered and shifting narrative that resists glib interpretation. The editor oscillates between casting Holloway as an unfortunate man capable of repentance and a morally bankrupt figure undeserving of redemption. At times, the editorial voice appears almost paternal, guiding the reader towards sympathy and Christian forgiveness; at others, it adopts a tone of moral severity, drawing attention to Holloway's contradictions and casting doubt on the sincerity of his remorse. On the other hand, Holloway's voice introduces a different, yet equally erratic, narrative register. He shifts between presenting himself as an innocent child raised in a loving household and as a depraved man capable of brutalising women. His gestures towards repentance and moral reflection are repeatedly undermined by moments of emotional detachment, delusion, or religious zeal. Sometimes, his narrative suggests genuine remorse; at others, it reads as self-serving or unhinged. As Peter Brooks argues, '[w]e worry about the trustworthiness of confessions because the speech-act that begins with the words "I confess" seems to be marked by contradictory intentions'.<sup>134</sup> This insight is particularly apt here: both Holloway's confession and the editor's framing are marked by conflicting impulses—to reveal, to justify, to seek forgiveness, and perhaps to manipulate. The result is a portrayal that invites the reader to question Holloway's veracity and his mental state. Is he a canny manipulator, a tormented sinner, or a madman seeking meaning in his downfall?

In *An Authentic and Faithful History*, Holloway declares on the night of the murder:

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134. Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3–4. See also Susan David Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Saul M. Kassin and Gisli H. Gudjonsson, 'The Psychology of Confessions: A Review of the Literature and Issues', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5, no. 2 (2004): 33–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1529-1006.2004.00016.x>. For a nineteenth-century theological perspective, see Archibald Boyd, *Confession, Absolution, and the Real Presence* (London: Seely, Jackson, & Halliday, 1867).

Although the night was beautifully bright, yet I felt, at times, an involuntary shudder come over me, when I looked at the box that I was conveying to its place of secrecy, and thought of its contents, and how the savageness of my nature had led me to take away an innocent life.<sup>135</sup>

The opening contrast between the ‘beautifully bright’ night and ‘the box’—described euphemistically as being ‘conveyed to its place of secrecy’—frames the burial in poetic, even tender terms. This lyrical language softens the violence of the act—as if he speaks of a treasured object rather than the container for his wife’s body, subtly distancing the speaker from the crime. However, this delicacy contrasts with his ‘involuntary shudder’ at the awareness of the ‘savageness of [his] nature’, which introduces a flicker of instinctive awareness—perhaps even remorse—that punctures the overall composure of his narrative. This moment aligns with Prichard’s theory of ‘moral insanity’, in which rational faculties remain intact while moral and emotional judgments become dangerously misaligned. At the same time, Holloway’s reference to the ‘savageness’ within him resonates with broader nineteenth-century frameworks that viewed male violence not merely as a moral failure but as a biological inevitability. This idea is also reinforced in the *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post*, 13 September 1831, which reports that Holloway, ‘with an end of the cord in each hand, [was] stretching it, with fiendlike energy, to extinguish life’, a phrase that evokes both demonic possession and animalistic savagery, stripping him of rational humanity and casting the act as driven by a feral intensity.<sup>136</sup> This motif enacts what Combe’s phrenological theory would describe as a clash of faculties: a man whose reflective composure implies the operation of reason or ‘Conscientiousness’, yet whose shocked reaction betrays the emotional pull of other organs, such as ‘Destructiveness’ or ‘Benevolence’, in conflict. This paradox, where confession coexists with detachment, reinforces the

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135. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 242.

136. ‘Further Confession of Holloway’, *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post* (London), 13 September 1831, accessed 11 May 2025, *The British Newspaper Archive*, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002631/18310913/017/0003>.

narrative of psychological fragmentation at the heart of both the *Authentic and Faithful History* and broader nineteenth-century discourses of criminal pathology.

The volume also offers a parallel visual representation of this fractured state in Figure 14.<sup>137</sup>

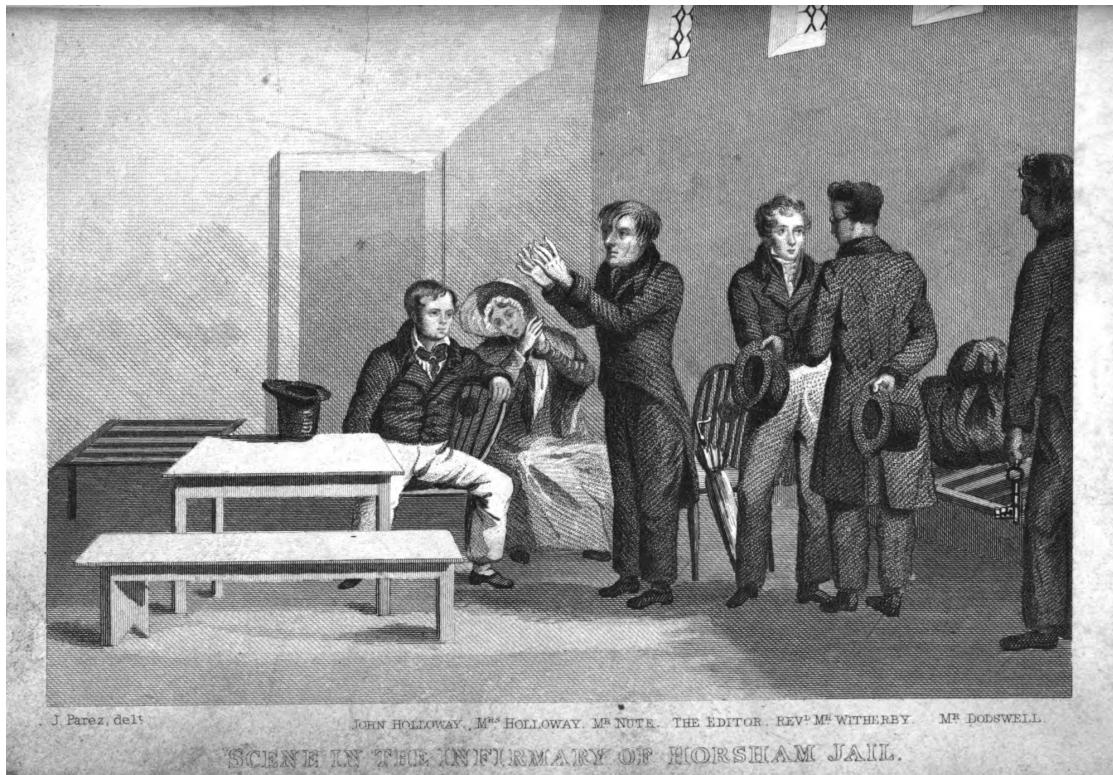


Figure 14. John Holloway is in the jail's infirmary with several people.

This figure shows Holloway in the infirmary of Horsham Jail, accompanied by his mother; Mr Nute, listed as the publisher of the volume; The Editor; Mr Dodswell, the governor of the jail; and Rev. Mr Wetherby (spelt 'Witterby' in the illustration caption), the chaplain. The verbal description of the scene is emotionally heightened, with Holloway kneeling before his mother, remaining in her arms for over a quarter of an hour. Yet this reported display of emotion is quickly undercut. Once his mother's grief subsides, Holloway 'very coolly' seats himself, shows no sign of shame, and calmly begins inspecting the contents of a basket. His pose in the accompanying illustration mirrors this

137. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, between 246 and 247.

emotional detachment. His demeanour looks at ease, seated sideways at a table with his back turned partly to the viewer, one arm draped over the back of the chair, fingers relaxed and hanging open. His other hand is loosely positioned behind the table, partially hidden from view. He sits with legs spread in full attire, wearing a jacket, shirt, and tie, his hair neatly combed to the side and his hat resting on the table beside him. As in the frontispiece—reportedly painted during this meeting, according to the volume’s verbal account—Holloway’s facial features retain a childlike softness, marked by an awkward, almost vacant stare. This artfully composed visual impression constructs a strikingly paradoxical figure. His composure contrasts sharply with the emotionally charged nature of the setting, surrounded by the jail governor, the illustrator capturing his likeness, the editor, the publisher of the volume detailing his life, and his mother. This incongruous calm evokes what Pinel described as a dull daze, a dissonance between the expectation of distress and the visual suggestion of indifference.<sup>138</sup> The childlike delicacy of his facial features adds a further layer of complexity. This visual disjunction complicates the viewer’s moral judgment and prompts a reading of Holloway as mentally unwell. A similar representation of this dazed detachment appears in the illustrated 1831 broadside ‘*The Full Confession of John Holloway, the Murderer of His Wife; Likewise Cutting Off Her Head, Legs and Arms*’ (see Figure 15), where Holloway stares blankly ahead while dismembering Celia.<sup>139</sup>

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138. Pinel, *Medico-Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation*, 11.

139. ‘*The Full Confession of John Holloway, the Murderer of His Wife; Likewise Cutting Off Her Head, Legs and Arms*’, broadside (Clerkenwell: J. V. Quick, 1831), Harvard Library, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990030366440203941>.



Figure 15. 'The full Confession of John Holloway, the Murderer of his Wife; likewise Cutting off her Head, Legs and Arms' broadside.

In this figure, Holloway methodically saws off Celia's arms while her severed head lies grotesquely at his feet; his vacant stare and eerie calm evoke a chilling sense of dissociation, as if he is entirely removed from the horror of his own actions. The image frames him as psychologically absent in the very moment of extreme violence, evoking contemporary fears of unrecognisable, hidden madness.

Another mode of dissociation emerges in Holloway's strategic turn to religious language in the *Authentic and Faithful History*, allowing him to replace emotional reckoning with a stylised confessional voice. Rather than confront the psychological weight of his crime, he constructs a redemptive self-image grounded in Christian devotion, portraying himself as spiritually sincere and morally conscious. He recounts his family's move from the Baptist chapel to the Methodist Society as a moment of divine providence—'bless the Lord, he ever was true to his promise [...] we never wanted'—framing his faith as resilient and unwavering.<sup>140</sup> Holloway positions himself as a morally aware young man who, despite the devil's temptations, 'through grace, kept pressing forward with [his] face Zionward'.<sup>141</sup> His tone shifts from confessional to admonitory as he warns against giving 'young pilgrims too much encouragement', claiming this leads to spiritual pride: 'too much self; whereas the young beginner is never more safe than when he is in the valley of humiliation'.<sup>142</sup> In doing so, Holloway offers here a carefully managed persona, asserting moral authority through a lens of religious devotion. This performative piety follows the pattern Susan Levin identifies in Romantic-era Methodist autobiographies, where shame is transformed into testimony.<sup>143</sup> Levin argues that such narratives often blurred devotional sincerity with canny self-stylisation.<sup>144</sup> Holloway's moral narrative also resonates with the phrenological discourse exemplified by George Combe. In his appendix on *The Life of David Haggart* (1821), Combe treats criminal confessions as

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140. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 12.

141. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 13.

142. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 13-14.

143. Susan M. Levin, *The Romantic Art of Confession: De Quincey, Musset, Sand, Lamb, Hogg, Fremy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 93.

144. Levin, *The Romantic Art of Confession*, 93.

empirical evidence of innate mental trait, such as 'great self-esteem' or 'a large combativeness'.<sup>145</sup>

This redemptive framing is not limited to Holloway's voice; it is also echoed and amplified by the editor, who bolsters Holloway's self-portrayal:

It cannot, indeed, be denied, that the mind of Holloway, formed as it was by the professors of Christ, is not one of an ordinary stamp, and that, in fact, it displays an energy possessed but by few; indeed, the very incoherency by which, in many of its details, his narrative is characterised, is a corroborative proof that some great and powerful spirit is working within him.<sup>146</sup>

The passage supplies a romanticised and spiritually charged portrait of Holloway, positioning him as an individual of exceptional mind and moral potential; even his 'incoherency' is evoked not as a flaw but as 'corroborative proof' of spiritual struggle. The phrase 'supported by the blessings of religion' reinforces Holloway's position within a redemptive moral framework – his spiritual insight persists even amid moral failure.

However, Holloway's carefully constructed religious persona begins to crumble as further contradictions emerge, revealing the fragile fiction of self he has cultivated. Most notably, his bigamous marriage to Ann Kennett under the false name 'William Goldsmith', his mother's maiden name, while still legally wed to Celia.<sup>147</sup> This act is formalised when the *Authentic and Faithful History* includes the marriage certificate, described as 'extracted from the parish register of Rhye' and dated 16 March 1830, in which Holloway is falsely identified as a 'bachelor' (see Figure 16).

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145. George Combe, 'Appendix', in *The Life of David Haggart, Alias John Wilson, Alias John Morison, Alias Barney M'Coul, Alias John M'Colgan, Alias Daniel O'Brien, Alias the Switzer. Written by Himself, While under Sentence of Death*, ed. George Robertson (London: W. and C. Tait, 1821), 159; a similar observation is made in Peter Garside's introduction to James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by Peter Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

146. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 15.

147. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 86.

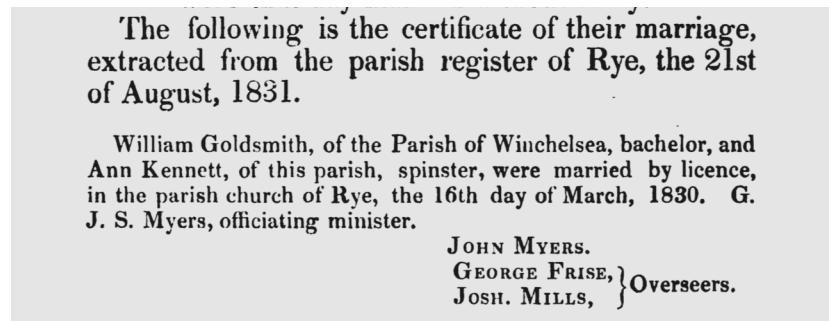


Figure 16. Holloway's bigamous marriage to Ann Kennett as recorded in *Authentic and Faithful History*.

The editor presents Holloway's marriage to Ann Kennett as a pivotal moral turning point—an event where his mask slips, revealing his true character. He states, 'In perhaps no period of his life can this warning with greater propriety be given, than in that which ended in his marriage with Ann Kennett'.<sup>148</sup> The tone suggests regret and moral judgment, framing the marriage as a mistake with destructive consequences. Though he portrays himself as a devout man guided by grace, pressing 'Zionward' and warning others against spiritual pride, this marriage exposes the extent to which his religious rhetoric masks morally reprehensible behaviour. His willingness to lie under oath, manipulate legal and religious institutions, and live a double life signifies that his spiritual language functions more as a strategy of self-exoneration than as a sincere confession. His spiritual narrative selectively omits key transgressions, particularly the emotional and legal abandonment of Celia, thereby exposing the deep fractures within the devout persona he performs. Thus, his marriage to Kennett exposes the hollowness of his spiritual posturing and highlights the dissonance between his professed morality and his actions.

Such dissonance is evident at other points in the text where the editor's phrasing problematises Holloway's supposed coherence or credibility. Holloway presents his parents, especially his mother, as paragons of religious virtue, describing how he was 'taken under [his mother's] own immediate

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148. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 86.

care' and raised with 'genuine piety and religion'.<sup>149</sup> He declares: 'I shall never forget my dear parents, how they watched my every motion [...] I think that never a father loved a son with more tender affection than my father loved me'.<sup>150</sup> Despite their poverty, their devotion is unwavering and their love unconditional: even after Holloway squandered money and returned home empty-handed: 'although I left home with money and clothes, and returned without either, yet my parents gladly received me, and did what they could to get me more clothes'.<sup>151</sup> Holloway continues to evoke his father as supportive following his marriage to Celia, stating: 'my father giving me what he could spare to furnish the house'.<sup>152</sup>

However, this romanticised account selectively downplays more troubling aspects, such as the physical discipline he feared and the delayed recognition of his father due to wartime separation. In his confession, Holloway reflects: 'I do not know that ever I as yet felt any conviction for sin, no more than what is common in children—the rod of my parents being my dread'.<sup>153</sup> This statement reveals that his parents used punishment severe enough to instil fear, contradicting the idealised portrait he crafts earlier. Holloway's claim that 'never a father loved a son with more tender affection' is quietly undermined by the editor's insertion: 'It was in the camp before Paris that Holloway says he first saw his father to know him. He was then about nine years of age'.<sup>154</sup> While the editor ascribes the statement to Holloway, the shift to third-person narration ('he') subtly distances Holloway from the claim, in contrast to earlier moments where he speaks directly in the

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149. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 7.

150. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 21.

151. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 26.

152. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 47.

153. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 9.

154. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 21.

first person 'I'. This grammatical shift reveals the editor's hand in curating the story. His understated correction invites readers to question the authenticity of Holloway's account, exposing the gaps and contradictions in Holloway's descriptions of familial harmony. By oscillating between Holloway's voice and editorial adjustments, the *Authentic and Faithful History* positions the murderer as a man consumed by self-narration—one who clings to a morally exculpatory interpretation of events that the text simultaneously undermines.

Another incident where the editor clashes with Holloway's narration occurs when Holloway claims he discovered Celia sleeping with her sister's husband two weeks before he murdered her. The editor immediately responds, 'We must, from a sense of delicacy, omit the sequel'.<sup>155</sup> Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how this comment functions as a rhetorical gesture that casts suspicion on Celia without offering proof, allowing scandal to linger in the reader's imagination. This effect is heightened when read alongside the editor's earlier endorsement of Holloway's assertion that Celia deceived him into marriage while already pregnant by another man. The repetition of such insinuations reinforces Celia's moral ambiguity through suggestion rather than substantiated evidence. However, the tone shifts markedly in the passage that follows. The editor begins to dismantle Holloway's credibility, noting that 'in every instance in which he adduces a charge against her, we are fully prepared to expect immediately afterwards, on his part, some severe and inhuman act', suggesting that his accusations function as a narrative pretext for brutality.<sup>156</sup> The word 'every' is particularly significant here. It implies a rejection of Holloway's current allegation and a retrospective dismissal of all previous claims against Celia. This sweeping language undermines any earlier support the editor may have offered Holloway's version of events. Indeed, the editor goes on to affirm

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155. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 104.

156. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 105.

Celia's innocence, stating:

We have, in a former part of this work, given to Celia the full benefit of the excellent character which is universally given to her by all who knew her; and in regard to the present charge, we have heard it most unequivocally denied, that Holloway had the slightest ground for the serious charge which he here brings against his wife.<sup>157</sup>

This shift reframes the narrative entirely: Holloway is now cast as a ruthless and deliberate manipulator rather than an unreliable but emotionally tormented man.

This critique is deepened with the assertion that 'it never would have been brought at all, if some pretext had not been wanting for his own cruel and infamous conduct'.<sup>158</sup> Most damning is the editor's psychological assessment of Holloway: 'In a heart so naturally depraved, so deeply degenerated as that of Holloway, it would be in vain to look for any feeling of a refined or delicate nature'.<sup>159</sup> The editor continues, 'If such feelings ever did exist in his breast, they had been long rendered obtuse by an habitual course of vice, and an unrestrained indulgence of his passions, reckless of the misery which he occasioned, or the injury which he inflicted on his victims'.<sup>160</sup> Holloway's heart is portrayed as so thoroughly corrupted by vice and cruelty that any trace of emotional refinement has long since decayed. His crime is 'the result of deep and secret premeditation for a length of time before the catastrophe was accomplished'.<sup>161</sup> The phrase 'deep and secret premeditation' directly contradicts earlier narrative gestures that might have implied his crime was born of emotional torment or spiritual crisis. The doubling of 'deep' and 'secret' intensifies the sense of lurking malice, while the temporal phrase 'for a length of time' stresses that

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157. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 105.

158. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 105.

159. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 106.

160. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 106.

161. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 105.

the murder was not a reactionary act but a conscious plan. Finally, calling the murder a ‘catastrophe’ adds moral and emotional gravitas, implying a tragic but preventable outcome, one fully orchestrated by Holloway, not thrust upon him by circumstance. Yet only a few pages later, the editor retreats from the earlier stance of total moral certainty and reintroduces textual ambiguity, stating, ‘It is not for us to determine the sincerity or falsity of his professions’.<sup>162</sup>

These contradictions and conflicting interpretations of Holloway suggest that a consistent ethical framework does not guide the text. Instead, it ‘performs’ an ambivalent, fluid and reactive morality shaped by the demands of narrative tension and sensational appeal. Such narrative fragmentation reflects broader nineteenth-century anxieties about wife-killing. Celia is positioned both as the transgressive woman and the innocent victim, while Holloway shifts between self-styled piety and calculated malice. The editorial voice, far from a reliable and robust mediator, emerges as unstable and, at times, complicit, revealing the extent to which moral judgment is contingent and ideologically fraught. As such, the text becomes a contested space where cultural fears about male violence, female sexuality, and the collapse of the patriarchal order are simultaneously enacted and interrogated.

A similar focus on the soundness of Holloway’s mind is reflected in the broadsides. The depiction of his confession in ‘The Horrible Details of the Apprehension’ broadside creates an image of disordered reasoning: ‘I know I committed the murder, but it is not plain or clear in evidence. The woman might have had a way with herself, and for fear I might have concealed it. I don’t say that is the case; but it might have been the case’.<sup>163</sup> The placement of this statement at the end of the broadside, in the trial section directly before the verdict, foregrounds and formalises

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162. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 106.

163. ‘The Horrible Details of the Apprehension’, broadside (1831).

Holloway's portrayal as morally unhinged and highlights his fractured logic. The broadside also depicts Holloway claiming in his confession that 'with the assistance of Kennet he conveyed [Celia's body] to Margaret-Street, and threw it down the privy', yet in his final statement before the judge, he insists, 'I don't wish to live; but let me only say this—Ann Kennet is innocent'. Here, the same man is shown both implicating his lover and, at another moment, defending her. This tension is amplified in the volume, which was published later, where Holloway is recorded as saying, 'I never struck poor Celia in my life in anger', a claim that starkly contradicts his accompanying detailed confession of strangling and dismembering her.<sup>164</sup> These illogical defences, even in the face of such a brutal admission, expose a profoundly distorted mind that appears incapable of reconciling the physical reality of the crime with its emotional or moral significance. By insisting that he never struck her in anger, Holloway attempts to retool the act of murder as detached from personal malice or passion, as though the absence of rage might somehow lessen the severity of his actions. This rhetorical manoeuvre not only trivialises the violence but also reflects a desire to preserve some notion of self-control, to present himself as rational rather than monstrous. The disconnection between the act and his affective claim points to a fractured self-image that resists full accountability by separating the physical act from emotional culpability. Such contradictions reveal a more profound anxiety about how his actions will be interpreted, both legally and morally.

This disjointed logic and Holloway's apparent expectation of acquittal signify impaired reasoning, pointing to an unstable mind struggling to reconcile moral responsibility with legal consequences. Yet this instability may not exist in opposition to contemporary beliefs but rather emerge from them. The cultural and legal climate of the time often spared men when the victims of their violence were their wives. Historically, wife-killing was treated with relative leniency under English common

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164. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 66.

law, particularly when framed as provoked or morally justified.<sup>165</sup> The doctrine of provocation often reduced a husband's charge from murder to manslaughter, especially when the wife was suspected of infidelity. This legal framework reflected broader cultural values, positioning male violence as disciplinary rather than criminal. By contrast, a wife who killed her husband was, until 1828, charged with petty treason—a crime considered more serious than murder. Petty treason framed the act as a betrayal of social and gender hierarchy and was punishable by burning at the stake for women.<sup>166</sup> Although this category was abolished by the Offences Against the Person Act 1828, its ideological legacy persisted. Holloway's belief that he could be both guilty and forgiven—both a murderer and a candidate for salvation—may, therefore, reflect not simply innate madness but a psyche shaped by the very legal and religious ideologies that surrounded him. This imbalance reveals how legal and cultural systems work together to preserve male authority and justify domestic violence and murder; such dynamics will be explored in more depth in the following chapters.

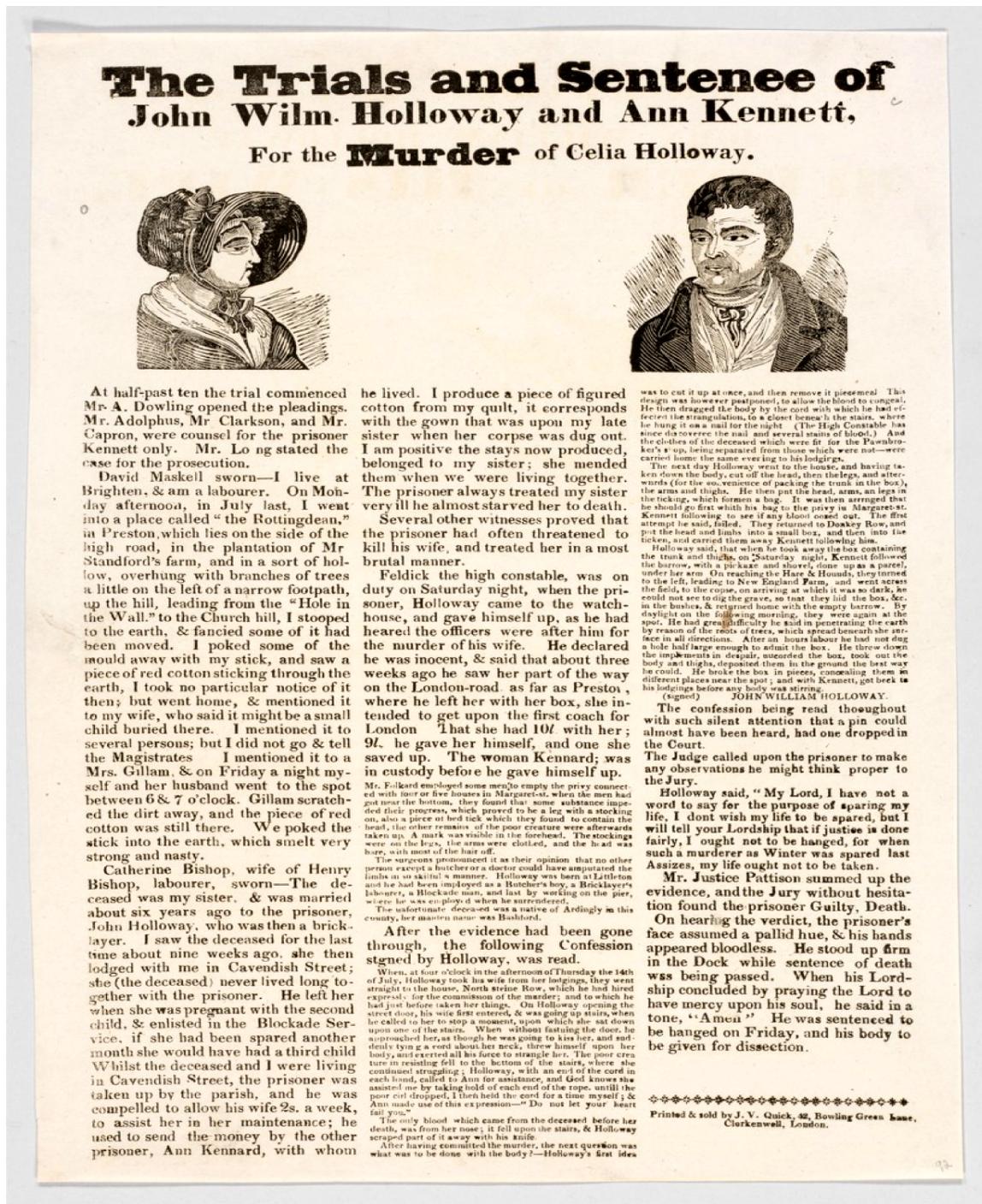
A similar troubled portrayal of Holloway is emphasised in the 1831 broadside 'The Trial and Sentence of John Wilm. Holloway and Ann Kennett; for the Murder of Celia Holloway'.<sup>167</sup> When the judge called on Holloway to make 'any observation he might think proper for the Jury', he responded, 'My Lord, I have not a word to say for the purpose of sparing my life [...] I ought not to be hanged, for when sentenced my life ought not to be taken away'. His words reveal confusion and a strange insistence on the injustice of a punishment he simultaneously accepts. This emotional

165. Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 93, accessed April 4, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=4672202>.

166. Gavigan, Shelley A. M. 'Petit Treason in Eighteenth-Century England: Women's Inequality Before the Law', *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 3, no. 2 (1989–1990): 337, [https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2455&context=scholarly\\_works](https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2455&context=scholarly_works).

167. 'The Trials and Sentence of John Wilm. Holloway and Ann Kennett; for the Murder of Celia Holloway', broadside (London: J. V. Quick, 1830), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 23 April 2025, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990029912560203941>.

ambivalence stands in stark contrast to the austere, procedural tone he adopts when describing the murder itself: 'I cut off the head and the legs from the body; and then rolled it up in a piece of green baize [ . . . ] I afterwards took it on my shoulders and carried it to the place where it was found'. The detached and practical language in which he recounts the dismemberment and transport of Celia's body reads less like a remorseful confession than a logistical account. The absence of horror or grief at this moment intensifies the sense of psychological fracture. The text also reveals that Holloway 'gave himself up' to the police only after Ann Kennett was arrested. After surrendering, he goes on to incriminate Kennett, claiming that she urged him to carry out the crime by telling him, 'Do not let your heart fail you'. The contradictory desire to shield Kennett and then accuse her points to a man torn between self-preservation and guilt, who manipulates his narrative according to circumstance. Such behaviour further complicates the question of Holloway's mental and moral state, painting a picture of someone not merely criminal but ethically incoherent and psychologically unreliable. This theme is further elaborated in the accompanying illustrations of Holloway and Ann Kennett (see Figure 17).



Harvard University - Harvard Law School Library / Executions of criminals: more generally known by the uninviting name of "Dying speeches."

Figure 17. 'The Trials and Sentence of John Wilm. Holloway and Ann Kennett; for the Murder of Celia Holloway', broadside (1831).

This figure, unlike earlier images that depict Holloway as youthful and composed, shows him aged, with lined features, a beard, and an empty, disengaged stare. His face appears asymmetrical, one side smaller, darkened, and receding into shadow, while his body faces directly forward. In contrast, Ann Kennett is depicted in profile, with her body and face both turned to the side, presenting a more conventional and consistent portrait. The unnatural positioning of Holloway's head and body, combined with his uneven facial shading and signs of visual ageing, appears to be a deliberate artistic strategy to convey internal fracture, mental instability, and moral erosion. Profoundly unbalanced, his disintegration is rendered visible through both text and image.

Whereas the broadsides and the *Authentic and Faithful History* volume construct a narrative of an unstable husband, the latter not only announces the guilty verdict but explicitly frames execution as the best possible outcome despite clear indications of Holloway's mental instability.<sup>168</sup> In doing so, the text never fully resolves whether his crime was the outcome of deliberate deviance or psychological disturbance. The result is a text caught between genres: part moral tract, part spiritual confession, and part criminal biography, all pulling in conflicting directions. This tension is crystallised in the final passage:

His career on earth is finished—he has, ere now, received his sentence from his God, and in Christian charity let us hope, that although Justice stood at the gate and said I must have sickness for their health—I must have ignominy for their honour—I must have death for their life; yet, that the gate was opened to let Mercy in, and that there has been joy in heaven over a sinner that has repented.<sup>169</sup>

This closing gesture situates Holloway's story within a religious discourse of divine judgment and

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168. A similar tendency to applaud execution appears in a broadside about William Divan, who murdered his wife by cutting her throat in 1824. See 'Account of the Execution and Behaviour on the Scaffold and since His Sentence, of William Divan, Who Suffered at Glasgow on Wednesday the 21st of July, 1824, for the Murder of His Own Wife, Mary Jamieson, in Paisley Loan, Gorbals, on 6 April. Last, By Cutting Her Throat, and His Body given for Dissection'. Broadside. *The Word on the Street*, National Library of Scotland. Accessed 9 May 2022. <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=14712>.

169. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History*, 366.

redemption, but the text never quite reconciles the demands of justice with the possibility of mercy. The invocation of mercy entering after execution both underlines and subverts the text's moral stance, signifying ongoing contemporary struggles to narrate guilt and salvation in the context of male madness.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, the street literature depictions of the Holloway case reflect the complexities and contradictions that shaped urgent nineteenth-century debates about gendered roles, legal reforms and criminal responsibility. Across visual and verbal formats, these materials provide readers with multifaceted representations that resist neat moralising accounts of wife-killing. Though they draw on familiar tropes of repentance, retribution, and warning, their meanings remain fluid and contested.<sup>170</sup> Being accessible through its low cost and its combination of visual and verbal texts—which made it legible even to the illiterate—and positioned outside elite cultural and legal frameworks, street literature tackled intimate and socially fraught subjects with raw immediacy, forming a direct connection with its audiences.<sup>171</sup> It supplied emotionally charged and sometimes transgressive portrayals that more respectable publishing venues often avoided. The Holloway case gave voice to perspectives frequently excluded from the dominant discourse, negotiating male-perpetrated spousal murder, culpability, and domestic transgression. The competing accounts grapple with gendered anxieties and unstable boundaries between public and private life, as well as between male and female authority, legal judgment, and emotional response. As seen in this chapter,

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170. Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 163.

171. Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature: The Story of Broadside Ballads, Chapbooks, Proclamations, News-sheets, Election Bills, Tracts, Pamphlets, Cocks, Catchpennies, and Other Ephemera* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973).

these depictions reveal more than just narrative trends—they expose entrenched assumptions and misgivings about intimate relationships, sometimes reinforcing hegemonic attitudes, sometimes debunking them. We are repeatedly made to ask: whose representation do we trust? Is there a hierarchy of truth between image and text? Within the same document, clashing meanings often coexist, and different media forms elicit conflicting reactions. A woodcut may articulate what a verbal text stumbles over, camouflages or evades altogether. The following chapters address how this polyphony (the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory resonances within a single artistic statement) extends to husband-killing, the escalating violence under intoxication, and the clandestine malice of poisoning.

## Chapter 2

### Intoxication: The Case of Margaret Shuttleworth née Tindal (1821)

In the heat of intoxication, supposed affronts, that had never been noticed by the party before, are called up, to claim an apology, or provoke a quarrel.

—Thomas Trotter's *An Essay, Medical, Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness, and Its Effects on the Human Body* (1813), 33.

These lines, published as moral warning in Thomas Trotter's essay on drunkenness, emphasise that the destructive influence of alcohol does not affect the 'drunkard' alone but extends to those in their company.<sup>1</sup> Here, Trotter summarises his views on drunkards' irresponsible nature, as their alcohol-impaired memory often serves as a partial defence, making it challenging to address the issue or hold them answerable. Trotter recommends avoiding their company to minimise the likelihood of encountering conflicts. Drunkards have, in his view, an 'imbecility of intellect, erroneous judgment, violent emotions, and loss of sense and motion, after the immoderate use of vinous liquors'.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for him, Henry Shuttleworth did not follow this contemporary advice and allegedly was killed by his inebriated wife, Margaret Shuttleworth (maiden name Margaret Tindale).<sup>3</sup> In the courtroom, the narrative unfolded as follows: Shuttleworth, seemingly under the influence of alcohol, killed her husband, Henry Shuttleworth, within the premises of the inn that they jointly managed in Montrose on Saturday, April 28th, 1821. The couple tended to drink to excess, and when intoxicated, they fought. According to their servant, on the evening of Henry's death, she

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1. Thomas Trotter, *An Essay, Medical, Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness, and Its Effects on the Human Body* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1813), 33, Internet Archive, accessed 17 June 2025, <https://archive.org/details/1813-trotter-on-drunkenness/page/n5/mode/2up>.

2. Trotter, 'Essay on Drunkenness', 19.

3. Note: In the primary materials referenced in this document, there are variations in the spelling of the name 'Tindale'. These variations have been maintained in the quotations as they appear in the original texts to preserve their historical accuracy.

assisted an inebriated Shuttleworth to bed. Upon awakening the following day, Shuttleworth could not recollect the previous night's events. However, she subsequently came across the lifeless body of her deceased husband. Despite her unwavering assertion of innocence, the thirty-six-year-old Shuttleworth was ultimately deemed guilty on September 19th, 1821, and was executed on December 9th, 1821. The verdict was based on the victim's dissection report and witness testimonies.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter undertakes a critical examination of Margaret Shuttleworth's case as represented in street literature. The analysis focuses on two broadsides and two chapbooks. The first chapbook, *The Trial of Margaret Tindal, Alias Shuttleworth*, exists in two distinct editions. The first, held at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, is dated 11 October 1821 and was published shortly after the trial. It includes a disclaimer promising the later release of a supplementary narrative if the motion for mercy was denied. The second edition, available via the Internet Archive, bears no publication date; however, its disclaimer similarly promises a supplement following the execution scheduled for November 5 (the initial date before it was postponed), which suggests it was published prior to that date. The promised supplement, *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth*, appears to have been issued separately after Shuttleworth's execution on 7 December, as it contains detailed accounts of the event. Strangely, both editions of *The Trial* are now physically bound with the *Memoir*.<sup>5</sup> While there are some textual differences between the two editions of *The Trial*—which will

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4. *The Trial of Margaret Tindal, Alias Shuttleworth, for the Murder of Her Husband, Henry Shuttleworth, Vintner, Montrose, at Perth, on the 19th day of September, 1821*, 2nd ed. chapbook (Montrose: John Smith, 1821), bound with *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth*, Internet Archive, accessed 18 May 2023, <https://archive.org/details/TheTrialOfMargaretTindalAliasShuttleworthForTheMurderOfHer/page/n3/mode/2up>.

5. *The Trial of Margaret Tindal, Alias Shuttleworth, for the Murder of Her Husband, Henry Shuttleworth, Vintner, Montrose, at Perth, on September 19th 1821*, 1st ed. chapbook (Montrose: John Smith, 1821), bound with *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth*, consulted at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; *The Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821); *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* chapbook (Montrose: John Smith, 1821).

be discussed in detail later—the *Memoir* chapbook is identical in both versions. This configuration suggests a later binding of the *Memoir* into each volume, likely by an archivist or collector, rather than as part of the original publication.<sup>6</sup> This analysis also engages with contemporary press coverage to offer a comparative lens through which to assess the representations found in street literature. I explore how the verbal and visual depictions in these texts negotiate Shuttleworth's case as an intoxicated husband-killer and how intoxication, gender, and violence intersect in the framing of 'fallen women' convicted of murder in popular print. The form and content of the street literature appear deliberately crafted to induce a metaphorical state of 'intoxication' in the audience: an overwhelming, sub-rational desire for sensational, bizarre, or gruesome content—a kind of readerly revelling in the outlandish. Later critics such as Henry L. Mansel, in 1863, castigated sensation authors as 'gatherer[s] of fresh stimulants from the last assizes', who, rather than elevating the public discourse with poetic or philosophical meditations on life and death, instead delighted in the macabre details 'laid out in the dissecting-room'.<sup>7</sup> While Mansel's comments addressed sensation fiction of the 1860s, street literature and the Newgate novel had already been exploiting representations of real and fictional crime, anticipating the very anxieties he described.<sup>8</sup>

The depiction of Margaret Shuttleworth's case in street literature provides a compelling study of how early nineteenth-century Scottish popular print not only mirrored but also shaped societal

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6. Note: The primary sources report varying dates for the execution. The disclaimer in *The Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), indicates it was scheduled for 5 November, while *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* states that it was postponed until 7 December (22). Conversely, the *Execution* broadside claims the execution was originally set for 7 November but ultimately took place on 7 December.

7. Henry L. Mansel, "'Sensation Novels', Quarterly Review, vol 113, no 226 (April 1863)', in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction, 1855-1890*, ed. Andrew Maunder, Sally Mitchell and Tamar Heller, vol. 1, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), 481-514.

8. Lauren Gillingham argues that while Newgate novels differ in their treatment of crime, their fascination with it 'is shared by all'. See Gillingham's 'The Newgate Novel and the Police Casebook', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Lee Horsley and Charles J. Rzepka (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 94, doi:10.1002/9781444317916.ch6.

perceptions and legal narratives. Although her case is not unique within the broader context of Scottish jurisprudence, its extensive coverage in both the contemporary press and street literature offers a unique insight into the complex interplay of popular representation, medico-legal discourse, gender expectations, and the pervasive influence of Christian morality. This chapter focuses on four interrelated areas: the portrayal of convicted women in street literature, their role as narrative counterparts to male perpetrators, their treatment within Christian doctrine and the distinctive Scottish legal system, and the influence of the emerging discipline of medical jurisprudence. By analysing the verbal and visual representations of her case in street literature, this chapter situates Margaret Shuttleworth within the project's broader investigation of the gendered dynamics of IPH, paying attention to the influence of Shuttleworth's gender on how her story was told and, as we will see, not told.

It is vital to scrutinise the portrayal of Shuttleworth's character across popular print from the outset. Focusing on character representations clarifies the societal attitudes, legal procedures, and moral judgements confronting a female offender in early nineteenth-century Scotland. This chapter shows that gendered framings were not monolithic: newspapers, chapbooks, and broadsides tell the same case differently.

## **2.1 Narrative Constructions, Omissions and Potential Biases: The Storytelling of Margaret Shuttleworth's Trial and Execution**

Anne-Marie Kilday, in *Women and Violent Crime in Enlightenment Scotland*, argues that 'fatally violent women in Scotland were not to be forgiven, understood or sympathised with'.<sup>9</sup> Women who

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9. Anne-Marie Kilday, *Women and Violent Crime in Enlightenment Scotland* (Woodbridge, UK: A Royal Historical Society Publication, The Boydell Press, 2007), 56.

committed lethal acts of violence were judged with exceptional severity, revealing the punitive moral climate of Enlightenment Scotland. Condemnation intensified when the victim was a husband, as such cases violated both legal authority and cultural ideals of marital sanctity and female subordination. Rachel E. Bennett explains:

[In] Murder, where a wife had murdered her husband or a woman had used extreme violence in the perpetration of her crime, there was an evident desire on the part of the courts to make examples of these individuals due to the belief that they had strayed so far from their traditional and domestic gender roles.<sup>10</sup>

Bennett emphasises that the societal response to such aberrations was typically extreme, resulting in disproportionately harsh punishments and heightened social vilification. In this context, the case of Margaret Shuttleworth is noteworthy. To fully grasp the extent of Shuttleworth's perceived transgression, it is necessary to examine the conduct books, which defined the behavioural codes by which women were judged.<sup>11</sup> Robert B. Shoemaker claims that these publications, 'more popular between the 1770s and the 1830s', provide a clear window into the expectations for women's behaviour during this era:

Based partly on perceived fundamental theological and anatomical facts, conduct-book writers assigned what they believed were characteristic virtues and faults to each sex. The female virtues mentioned most frequently by these commentators were chastity and purity; modesty, meekness, and patience; tenderness and charity; and piety and devotion. Although sexual continence was a virtue expected of both sexes, conduct manuals followed the prevailing 'double standard' in arguing that it was more important that women be chaste, because woman's infidelity had greater practical consequences (since children of doubtful paternity threatened family property) and because it was thought that, due to their weakness, once women acted immorally their passions would become uncontrollable. Indeed, since women were created subordinate to men and in order to serve their needs, sexual fidelity was the essential female virtue. Keith Thomas has argued that 'from this prime insistence on women's chastity emerged most of the other social restrictions upon her conduct'. It is certainly the case that many of the other words used to

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10. Rachel E. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland, 1740-1834* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 31.

11. Robert Brink Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650–1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London: Longman, 1998), 21. He notes that 'Conduct books form part of a long tradition of books of moral instruction, including discussions of the purpose of marriage and the proper ordering of domestic relations, which date back to before the Reformation' (21).

describe female virtues in this period, such as shame, honour, propriety, purity, and the most common word of all, modesty, were often euphemisms for chastity. Yet modesty meant more than that; together with meekness, patience, and even silence, it was about a general pattern of reserved behaviour and self-effacement which derived from women's perceived 'softness', their lack of 'choler', and the need for obedience to their parents or husbands.<sup>12</sup>

Shoemaker claims that even though conduct literature was 'written by members of the educated elite, and it was often targeted at a middle- or upper-classes audiences', their 'advice did not depend on the social class of the reader; in their minds, gender roles were not class specific'.<sup>13</sup> Such texts reveal how femininity was a product of cultural ideology rather than natural difference. They embedded these virtues in a patriarchal moral framework that positioned women as inherently passive, emotionally restrained, and obedient to male authority. Within this model, femininity was defined not only by the presence of virtues such as chastity and modesty but also by the deliberate absence of traits associated with assertiveness or anger—what these writers termed 'choler'. The concept of 'choler' is pivotal because it exposes how the ideal of feminine 'softness' functioned as an instrument of control, prescribing emotional restraint as a moral virtue. Women were thus expected to perform meekness and self-effacement, their emotional range tightly governed by an overarching expectation of modesty and obedience. It is important to note that this was not limited to England. Tabitha Kenlon's *Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman* (2020) shows that at the time there was extensive reprinting of conduct literature in various locations beyond London, encompassing Ireland, Scotland, and even as far afield as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> This widespread interest reflects the broad acceptance of particular gender norms, attitudes and roles within these culturally linked Western societies. As I demonstrate later, these deep-rooted societal expectations

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12. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, 23.

13. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, 22.

14. Tabitha Kenlon, *Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman* (London: Anthem Press, 2020), 92.

are reflected in the depiction of Shuttleworth's case in the press and street literature. Although she never confessed, her alcoholism and unruliness marked a breach of these prescriptive ideals, so that the charge against her was read through a moral lens; her 'gendered' failure amplified public hostility and legitimated judicial severity. Thus, Shuttleworth's fate was determined by a community whose outrage was structured by gendered norms; the reaction tells us as much about the policing of womanhood as it does about the alleged crime.

In the grim narrative of Margaret Shuttleworth's fate, the societal and legal mechanisms of her time converge to illustrate a punitive approach that extended beyond the grave, attesting to the era's conflation of justice with posthumous retribution. According to the article, 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', published in *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* on 1 October 1821, she was sentenced by 'His Lordship [...] to be executed at Montrose, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, and her body to be given for dissection'.<sup>15</sup> The 'Death Warrant' published in the *Memoir* also proclaimed that Shuttleworth's punishment was 'to be hanged by the neck upon a gibbet until she be dead, and ordain her body afterwards to be delivered to Doctor Alexander Monro, Professor of Anatomy in the University of Edinburgh, to be publicly dissected and anatomised'.<sup>16</sup> It also declared that the execution verdict was permitted according to the '1751 Murder Act', 'the Act of Parliament made in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of His Majesty King George the Second, entitled, "An Act for the better preventing of the horrid crime of Murder"'.<sup>17</sup> This Act mandated a 'peculiar mark of infamy' to be expressed

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15. 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* (Belfast), 1 October 1821, 1, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 26 May 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001287/18211001/011/0001>.

16. See 'The Death Warrant' in *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15.

17. See 'The Death Warrant' in *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15; and '1751: 25 George 2 c.37: The Murder Act', *The Statutes Project*, accessed 10 October 2023, <https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/eighteenth-century/1751-25-geo2-c37-murder-act/>.

through post-mortem indignities: either the display of the body in chains or dissection. Sarah Tarlow and Emma Battel Lowman, in *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse* (2018), contend that this additional punishment was based ‘on a perceived need to set murder apart from other crimes. [...] Penalising small theft and murder with the same punishment—death by hanging—seemed to offer little deterrent to, or differentiation from, the commission of one of the most violent and socially transgressive crimes’.<sup>18</sup> Margaret Shuttleworth’s indictment, as documented by *The Trial* chapbook, directly stated this purpose: ‘Margaret Tindal or Shuttleworth OUGHT to be punished with the pains of law, to deter others from committing the like crimes in all time coming’.<sup>19</sup> This post-mortem desecration starkly communicated that such a heinous crime not only separated one from the local community in life via execution but also in death, obstructing the transition to a peaceful afterlife and permanently establishing a cautionary tale within the societal consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Ruth Richardson’s *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (1987) explores how, at the time, ‘several beliefs which attribute sentience to the dead body seem to lead towards the conclusion that there existed a conception (said by anthropologists also to operate in primitive societies) of a period between death and burial in which the human being was regarded as “neither alive nor fully dead”’.<sup>21</sup> This liminal condition is significant in the context of dissection as a post-mortem punishment because it implies that the deceased retains a degree of personhood, thus making dissection a violation of both the individual’s corporeal and spiritual state. The dread of dissection among the living was, therefore,

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18. Sarah Tarlow, and Emma Battel Lowman. *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 92.

19. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 5.

20. ‘1751: 25 George 2 c.37: The Murder Act’.

21. Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 15, Internet Archive, accessed 27 May 2025, [https://archive.org/details/deathdissection0000rich\\_j1z4/page/36/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/deathdissection0000rich_j1z4/page/36/mode/2up).

not only due to the physical desecration but also the transgression against what was deemed a sacred phase of transition, reinforcing the punishment beyond the act of dying itself. Similarly, Tarlow and Lowman posit that ‘the exposure of the body was a source of humiliation to the condemned and shame to their family and friends. Further, the desecration and destruction of the body precluded the anticipatory comfort of a burial in accordance with one’s faith’.<sup>22</sup> They add that ‘the formal use of post-mortem punishment and the prevention of the burial rites associated with Christian salvation (the “proper” burial of an intact body) represented an attempt to assert the authority of the law over that of God by placing “decisions over the spiritual salvation over criminals within the hands of the secular courts”’.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Shuttleworth, the application of post-mortem punishment through public dissection exemplifies the arguments presented by Tarlow and Lowman. The exposure and subsequent dissection of her body served not only as a form of extreme societal humiliation for Shuttleworth and her family but also a stark demonstration of the state’s power over ecclesiastical domains. By denying her the anticipatory solace of burial in keeping with her faith, the authorities underscored the primacy of legal judgment, effectively positioning the state as a pivotal arbiter of the body and soul in life and death.

The 1751 Murder Act,<sup>24</sup> under George II’s reign, was a legislative response to an alarming increase in incidents of murder, especially within the vicinity of London. The ‘Murder Act’ began with a striking declaration, ‘[the] horrid crime of murder has of late been more frequently perpetrated than formerly, and particularly in and near the metropolis of this kingdom, contrary to the known humanity and natural genius of the British nation’, signifying an urgency to address the

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22. Tarlow and Lowman, *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse*, 93.

23. Tarlow and Lowman, *Harnessing the Power of the Criminal Corpse*, 93.

24. ‘1751: 25 George 2 C.37: The Murder Act’.

unsettling trend.<sup>25</sup> Bennett claims that the increase in violent crimes in London at the time resulted from mid-eighteenth-century demobilisation and peaked after the War of the Austrian Succession, leading to various legislative proposals in the early 1750s, among which is the 'Murder Act', aimed at curbing what was perceived as an escalating crime wave in metropolitan areas.<sup>26</sup> However, Richard Ward argues differently, stating that 'the Murder Act' was greatly amplified by the press and created a perception of cultural crisis far beyond the actual situation.<sup>27</sup> Analysis of the decade preceding this act reveals that murder prosecutions in London were consistent with or lower than the long-term average from 1720 to 1759, with 1751 recording only two notable capital convictions.<sup>28</sup> However, print media outlets like *The Daily Advertiser* and *Penny London Post*, dramatised these incidents, intensifying the public's fear.<sup>29</sup> This heightened sense of urgency, influenced by the mainstream press and impacting London's criminal justice decision-makers, played a key role in accelerating the government's decision to enact the Murder Act.<sup>30</sup> These insights into how contemporary print media outlets can shape legislation and influence verdicts suggest that the intemperate and skewed coverage of Shuttleworth's case played a role in her conviction and ultimate fate. The interplay between street literature and the legal system in early nineteenth-century London reveals a dynamic in which public narratives not only mirrored judicial processes but also actively moulded them. While the press's role in shaping public perception and policy in response to murder was clear in the

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25. '1751: 25 George 2 C.37: The Murder Act'.

26. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland*, 60.

27. Richard M. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 171.

28. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice*, 170-171

29. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice*, 171.

30. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice*, 172.

enactment of the 1751 Murder Act, it becomes especially poignant when considering the case of Margaret Shuttleworth in Scotland, where the legal system's stringent standards for proceeding to trial highlight the extraordinary weight of media influence in shaping public opinion and judicial outcomes.

According to Bennett, in the early nineteenth century Scotland's legal system stood distinct from that of England. Scottish criminal trials typically proceeded only when the authorities believed the case against the accused was 'effectively incontrovertible', a stark contrast to English procedures.<sup>31</sup> Bennett's analysis highlights the implications of this standard for those charged with serious offences before the Court of Justiciary and how prospects for acquittal were bleak.<sup>32</sup> If 'effectively incontrovertible' evidence was the threshold for a criminal trial in Scotland, it underscores the immense burden of proof required to establish guilt. However, the case of Margaret Shuttleworth, as depicted in the press and street literature, suggests a deviation from such standards. While it is evident that this anomaly calls for an examination of several potential biases in her case, my analysis will concentrate on the aspect of gender bias. In the case of Margaret Shuttleworth, a woman accused of breaching the virtues of chastity, modesty, and obedience, the popular print's depiction was particularly damning, reinforcing gendered expectations and likely swaying public opinion. This depiction may have also influenced legal decision-makers, contributing to her ultimate condemnation and execution, a tragic reflection of the period's stringent attitudes toward gender norm violations. This intersection of gender bias and popular print influence raises critical questions about the fairness of Shuttleworth's trial and the extent to which societal expectations of femininity may have tipped the scales of justice against her. How did perceptions of Shuttleworth's gender

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31. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland*, 220.

32. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland*, 32.

influence the verdict, if at all? How might the entrenched norms about Christian labouring women have coloured the legal lens through which she was viewed?

Margaret's case, as presented in the two editions of *The Trial*, the *Memoir*, two broadsides, and the press, supplies a complex narrative about the portrayal of a convicted woman. It highlights various instances where the editors' intent appears to be to shape and control the public's interpretation and emotional response to the unfolding legal drama. S. Karly Kehoe's 'Crime and Punishment, Immorality and Reform' from *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780-1914*, contends that during that era, criminal women were subjected not only to severe punishment but were also systematically silenced, their own stories obscured:

It is a particular challenge within this field to identify the female voice itself, and this is true not only for working-class and rural women who came before the courts but also for middle-class reformers. On the one hand, the voices of women accused of crime are mediated by the standard practices of legal documentation and yet, on the other, while reports of institutions and voluntary bodies do give many indications of women's role within them, they provide little in the way of examples of women's authorship of texts.<sup>33</sup>

This mediation of working-class women's voices by 'standard practices of legal documentation' becomes more than just an administrative procedure. It acts as a methodical muting, stripping women of their agency. In *The Trial*, Shuttleworth's account of what happened that night is overshadowed by the testimonies of witnesses. In contrast, the depiction of the Holloway case, involving a male perpetrator of IPH, places the accused man's voice front and centre; and his story is presented (apparently) in his own words, as narrated to the editor, occupying much of the text.<sup>34</sup>

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33. S. Karly Kehoe, 'Crime and Punishment, Immorality and Reform', in *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780-1914*, ed. Linda Fleming, Esther Breitenbach, S. Karly Kehoe and Lesley Orr, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2013), 162.

34. John William Holloway and Various Hands, *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway: With an Accurate Account of All the Mysterious and Extraordinary Circumstances Which Led to the Discovery of Her Mangled Body in the Copse in the Lover's Walk at Preston, Near Brighton; Including Also the Trial for the Murder, and the Extraordinary Confessions of John William Holloway, Together with His Life, Written by Himself, and*

### 2.1.1 The Press

The mainstream press coverage of the case presents a one-dimensional depiction of Margaret as the villain by selectively highlighting incriminating evidence and ignoring any other evidence that might suggest otherwise. My purpose here is to show how selective citation and omission in the press manufactured a gendered narrative of female deviance. This deliberate framing reveals an attempt to shape public perception and dictate the prevailing narrative surrounding Margaret and her case. For instance, while the court allegedly rejected the claim about the existence of the blood and hair-stained poker at the crime scene, various newspapers persisted in presenting it as irrefutable evidence.<sup>35</sup> The article 'Perth Assizes', published in *Inverness Courier* (September 27th, 1821) and 'Summer Assizes' from *Saunders's News-Letter* (October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1821), declared that '[t]wo witnesses proved the finding of the poker in Shuttleworth's house; it was bent at the one end; there was blood on it, and some hair'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, 'Circuit Court of Justiciary' published in *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* (October 01<sup>st</sup>, 1821), stated that 'a poker was found, opposite deceased's bed, bent, and with hair on it'.<sup>37</sup> However, *The Trial* chapbook published on October 11<sup>th</sup> claims that Doctor Hoile 'examined the poker, but did not see any thing upon it; saw no blood upon it'.<sup>38</sup> Another example involves 'Summer Assizes' from *The General Evening Post*, (September 27<sup>th</sup>) and 'Summer Assizes' from

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*Published by His Own Desire, for the Benefit of Young People* (London: W. Nute, 1832), Internet Archive, accessed 6 March 2025, <https://archive.org/details/anauthenticandf00hollgoog>.

35. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 17.

36. 'Perth Assizes', *Inverness Courier* (Inverness, Scotland), 27 September 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 26 May 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000446/18210927/021/0002>; 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post* (London), 27 September 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 29 May 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002593/18210927/019/0003>.

37. 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 October 1821.

38. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 17.

*Saunders's News-Letter* (October 6<sup>th</sup>) selectively incorporating parts of witness' narratives to accentuate Shuttleworth's guilt.<sup>39</sup> For instance, these two articles highlighted the part of Catherine Macleod, the maid's testimony that stated that 'the prisoner expressed no wish to send for a doctor' and ignored the part of the testimony where she stated the prisoner was so drunk the night of the murder that she couldn't even dress herself or go to her bed without being carried.<sup>40</sup> Also, they included Mr Ferguson, the neighbour's testimony, which emphasised that he was the one who proposed calling the doctor. These articles, highlighting Shuttleworth's unwillingness to call for a doctor the night of the murder, emphasised the incriminating evidence against her even though Henry was already dead—a point at which sending for a doctor would have been futile.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, these newspapers deliberately overlook instances where Shuttleworth's actions contradicted the narrative of negligence.

In contrast to the articles, *The Trial* chapbook includes details that undermine this narrative. For instance, both Robert Burnes and Mr Thompson note that while the burial was initially planned for Tuesday, Margaret insisted on postponing it until Thursday.<sup>42</sup> *The Trial* reveals that Margaret sought further analysis of the body to determine the cause of death, demonstrating her interest in uncovering the truth when it was crucial. Also noteworthy is the inclusion of Mr Ferguson's testimony in these articles. He asserted that after he left John the night before, he 'heard no person enter the house after he left him, and no noise or disturbances whatever' coming from the

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39. 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter* (Dublin), 6 October 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 26 May 2023.  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001057/18211006/010/0001>; 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821.

40. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 21

41. 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter*, 6 October 1821; and 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821.

42. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 18 and 20.

Shuttleworth house.<sup>43</sup> The testimonies of two other witnesses who reported the contrary, as revealed in *The Trial*, are entirely disregarded. Jane McDonald, who was present in the Shuttleworth house at 10pm, attested that she '[heard] some dogs barking that night, which continued for a long time. [She] heard Shuttleworth ask the maid to undress her mistress and thinks Shuttleworth was the worse for liquor'.<sup>44</sup> Mary Thorn also reported that she 'heard the barking of dogs near to Shuttleworth's door [...] and she believes it might have been close to eleven o'clock when she heard the dog'.<sup>45</sup> The omission of these accounts suggests a deliberate attempt to disregard any evidence that might indicate the possibility of a stranger committing the crime.

Another article titled 'Edinburgh, November 3rd' published by *Glasgow Herald* (5<sup>th</sup> November 1821) announced Margaret 'received a respite for one month'.<sup>46</sup> Still, it did not include any details or explain why this respite was granted. Selective reporting reflects editorial bias, shaping the narrative to portray her in a more damning light. These scenarios show that Margaret faced pervasive adversarial challenges from the press. This is not merely an inadvertent oversight: it is a potent mechanism of control wherein Shuttleworth's narrative is meticulously filtered, repackaged, or even effaced to align with prevailing societal frameworks. Moreover, this editorial orchestration appears compounded by the newspapers' denominational and political investments. Such agenda-driven narratives not only manipulate public perception but also uphold specific ideological interests, weaving Shuttleworth's story into the broader tapestry of socio-political discourse and power

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43. 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter*, 6 October 1821; and 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821.

44. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 18.

45. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), 14.

46. 'Edinburgh, November 3rd', *Glasgow Herald* (Glasgow), 5 November 1821. *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 28 May 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000060/18211105/018/0004>.

dynamics of the time. As Fiona M. Douglas in *Scottish Newspapers, Language, and Identity* argues that 'Even the presentation of facts, which forms a large part of the newspapers' remit, has to be mediated through language, and language itself inherently involves choices'.<sup>47</sup>

In this context, Margaret Shuttleworth's narrative, as captured in the period's press reportage, was often filtered through the lens of broader societal prejudices and preconceptions, which sidelined her standpoint as unworthy of documentation or acknowledgement. This pattern is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader historical trend of gendered representation in crime reportage. As Esther Breitenbach, Linda Fleming, S. Karly Kehoe, and Lesley Orr observe in the introduction to *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780–1914*, of the insidious suppression of women—particularly those from the lower classes—has long shaped historical narratives.<sup>48</sup> This systemic marginalisation relegated women like Margaret to the edges of historical narratives, overshadowing the complexity of personal identity, social class, and cultural transgression that they embodied. While newspapers stabilised a single moral reading through selection and emphasis, street literature both echoed and contested that reading, staging the gendered script more overtly even as it opened small spaces for sympathy and doubt. The following section turns to these representations in *The Trial* chapbook and its companion *Memoir*, alongside two broadsides. To fully grasp the narrative construction, a comparative analysis of the variances between these publications is essential. This press-constructed image of female deviance establishes the ideological groundwork later intensified in the two editions of *The Trial*.

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47. Fiona M Douglas, *Scottish Newspapers, Language, and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 58.

48. Esther Breitenbach, Linda Fleming, S. Karly Kehoe, and Lesley Orr, eds., *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780–1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 13.

### 2.1.2 Examining the Variances: A Comparative Study of the Two Editions of *The Trial*

The two editions of *The Trial* reveal how editorial revisions contributed to the construction and reinforcement of a gendered moral framework. Seemingly minor lexical changes between the editions heighten the sense of domestic invasion and emotional excess. Before undertaking a comparative reading of the two editions, it is necessary to note several contextual details. First, both editions were published before Margaret Shuttleworth's execution. The first edition, released on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1821, only twenty days after the verdict, constructs a monstrous image of Margaret, shaping early public sentiment.<sup>49</sup> The second edition appeared a few weeks later, sometime before the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, as indicated by the disclaimer.<sup>50</sup> The disclaimer in both editions promises the publication of the *Memoir* as a supplementary chapbook, contingent upon the execution taking place and 'mercy' being denied. This conditional framing suggests not only sensitivity to the case's unresolved outcome but also an awareness of the publication's capacity to shape public opinion.<sup>51</sup> The 'Notice to the Second Edition' outlines that the editor's motivation for republishing was not only that the first edition had sold out; it also provided an opportunity to 'rectify errors' and 'refine the narrative for accuracy and clarity'.<sup>52</sup> As the editor states:

In this edition he has again availed himself of the assistance which has been so kindly offered him by those who were painfully but necessarily engaged in the judicial proceedings, to correct some trivial inaccuracies—re-arrange the list of the jury—and make a material alteration in the speech of the Lord Justice Clerk.<sup>53</sup>

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49. The verdict was on Thursday, the 20th of September 1821. For more see, *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 23.

50. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 22.

51. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), disclaimer page.

52. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), disclaimer page.

53. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), disclaimer page.

Although the disclaimer suggests an honest endeavour to correct mistakes, the alterations go beyond a mere ‘re-arrange[ment]’ of the jury list, the only alteration plausibly intended to pursue factual precision.<sup>54</sup> However, this claim to factual precision is complicated by other editorial choices throughout the chapbook. Sentences have been inserted and altered in various sections, subtly shifting the narrative. The second edition’s timing—released before Shuttleworth’s execution—and its revised content suggest a more strategic editorial decision to intensify her negative portrayal while the case’s outcome was still pending. As the discussion will show, these changes operate to steer readers to the conclusion that Margaret is irredeemable, and her execution is justified.

These subtle modifications appear as early as the first page of the second edition, where a sentence is included that does not appear in the first: ‘Upon being requested to stand up for the purpose of being identified by the witnesses she did so promptly, and did not seem at all embarrassed’.<sup>55</sup> The editorial decision to describe Shuttleworth’s composed reaction upon being identified by witnesses, ‘she did so promptly, and did not seem at all embarrassed’, can be interpreted through the lens of the conduct books’ prescribed virtues for women, such as modesty, meekness, and patience. Considering these gendered expectations, Shuttleworth’s unflappable demeanour could be read as a deviation from the socially sanctioned ‘softness’ and emotional expressiveness expected of women, thereby casting her calmness in an incriminating light. This editorial choice may not only reflect but also reinforce the double standard, where a woman’s stoicism in the face of accusation contradicts the ideal of feminine modesty, which encompassed a

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54. Among the fifteen jurors listed, only five retain consistent names and titles across both editions, with the remaining ten displaying notable inconsistencies. For instance, ‘Robert Smythe’ appears as ‘Robert Smith’, and ‘William Fleeming’ becomes ‘Fleming’. A title given as ‘Colonel Belshes of Inverary’ in the first edition expands to ‘Alexander Hepburn Belshes, Esq. of Inverary’ in the second. See the Jury list in *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 6.

55. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), 3.

broader pattern of reserved yet emotionally responsive behaviour.

Another alteration is the replacement of a word in the maid's testimony. In the first edition, the maid said that she was not home the night of the murder, and when she returned, she found the neighbour, Mrs Farquharson. When she asked her what happened, 'Mrs Farquharson said Shuttleworth had fallen down the stair, near panel's room door—his feet lying across the bedroom door, the head towards the shop'. The second edition replaces the word 'shop' with 'kitchen'.<sup>56</sup> This setting could evoke an intemperate, even visceral reaction from the public, framing the crime as an invasion of the sanctity of home life. Bridgit Walsh argues that '[s]o central was the importance of the home to Victorian thinking, and so profound was the betrayal occasioned by the crime of domestic murder, it was regarded as "domestic treason"'.<sup>57</sup> Such a narrative twist, while understated, has the potential to sway public sentiment and emotional engagement with the case beyond its legal implications.

Scrutinising the 'Certificate of the Surgeons' from the first and second editions of *The Trial* reveals another small yet potentially significant editorial revision. The first edition concludes the report on the broken skull with, 'there was some extravasated blood under the pericranium, and a considerable quantity escaped from the cavity of the skull and the brain, so that it could not be ascertained'.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, the second edition specifies the uncertain 'it' with 'so that the amount of it could not be ascertained', emphasising the volume of blood.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the alteration from

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56. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 12.

57. Bridgit Walsh, "'The Demon in the Dock': Domestic Murder in Street Literature and the Newspaper Press", in *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 14.

58. See the 'Certificate of the Surgeons' in *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 1st ed. (1821), 16.

59. See the 'Certificate of the Surgeons' in *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), 16.

‘many little pieces of bone’ to ‘many detached pieces of bone’ could carry weight in a forensic analysis. Although both describe the presence of bone fragments, the term ‘detached’ suggests an unnatural and more substantial disconnection from the skull, possibly indicating a more forceful impact. This linguistic refinement could influence the perceived intensity of the assault, as the second edition’s description conjures a more vivid image of the violence inflicted upon the victim. Such details, while seemingly minor, carry substantive implications in the court of public opinion, swaying audience perception of the incident’s severity.

A significant and final editorial alteration is found on the last page of *The Trial* chapbook. This modification occurs in the middle of the Lord Justice Clerk’s speech addressing the prisoner after the verdict. A phrase is added to the second edition that was not present in the first. The first edition reads:

Recollect that you have to perform a most important duty in making some amends for the crimes of which you have been guilty, before departing from this world, to appear before the justice-seat of God, to account for every crime which you have committed in this world.<sup>60</sup>

The second edition reads:

With regard to mercy in this world being extended to you, the circumstances of your case forbid any hope of it; therefore, ‘lay not the flattering unction to thy soul;’ but recollect that you have to perform a most important duty in making some amends for the crimes of which you have been guilty, before departing from this world, to appear before the justice-seat of God, to account for every crime which you have committed in this world.<sup>61</sup>

While both versions call for Margaret to repent and seek divine forgiveness, the phrase added to the second edition unequivocally dismisses any possibility of earthly mercy for the convicted woman, establishing a markedly harsher tone. By incorporating ‘[w]ith regard to mercy in this world being extended to you, the circumstances of your case forbid any hope of it’ the second edition firmly

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60. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 1st ed. (1821), 24.

61. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), 24.

closes the door on any anticipation of leniency or pardon from a worldly perspective, thereby intensifying the hopelessness of the prisoner's predicament. Additionally, the quotation 'lay not the flattering unction to thy soul' introduces a literary allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which admonishes the prisoner against self-deception or solace in false hope. The quote serves to deepen the sense of urgency for the prisoner to confront her crime and seek spiritual redemption. The Lord Justice Clerk's speech, as edited in the second edition, underlines a depiction of the legal system as an unassailable edifice of state power.

Such a depiction is at odds with the paratextual framing of *The Trial* and the accounts provided by the *Memoir*. The disclaimer of both editions of *The Trial* recognises the possibility of leniency. The first indicates that 'an application has been transmitted to the fountain of Mercy'.<sup>62</sup> The second states that a supplementary release would appear on the 5th of November, the day of the execution, if 'mercy not be extended to this unhappy individual'.<sup>63</sup> This hope of leniency from the outset prompts the question: if the editorial additions to the Lord Clerk's speech in the second edition do not align with the reported circumstances, could this suggest a deliberate manipulation of the narrative? This editorial tactic downplays the complexities of legal procedure and diminishes the human aspects inherent in the case, nudging readers to view justice as an unyielding and unchangeable force.

In contrast, the *Memoir* elaborates on the possibility of leniency. It declares that the execution day was deferred until the 7th of December for reinvestigation.<sup>64</sup> This delay, it states, was the result of 'the petitions and a correspondence that took place between Lord Sidmouth and the Law Officers of

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62. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 1st ed. (1821), disclaimer page.

63. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), disclaimer page.

64. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 22.

the Crown for Scotland', which requested clemency for Margaret Shuttleworth and resulted in the government granting a 'respite for one month'.<sup>65</sup> The *Memoir* also confirms that Margaret, those around her, and the wider public were awaiting the results of the reinvestigation before her execution—suggesting a strong possibility of leniency. It notes that, as hope for a favourable reply mounted, 'no public event ever anticipated in Montrose was remembered to have drawn such a crowd at the post office'.<sup>66</sup> This conflicting dynamic between the two chapbooks, *The Trial* and the *Memoir*, not only exposes their divergent editorial agendas but also frames Margaret within a melodramatic register that—while designed to affirm her guilt—simultaneously invites sympathy through its heightened emotional tone. This tension between condemnation and compassion, already evident in their framing of justice and mercy, becomes even more pronounced in the contrasting depictions of Margaret's character explored in the following section.

### 2.1.3 *The Trial* vs the *Memoir*

The examination of visual and verbal elements across *The Trial* chapbook and its supplement, the *Memoir*, reveals distinct editorial manoeuvres that generate divergent narratives, each exploring justice and punishment in its own way. In contrast to *The Trial*, the *Memoir* begins to unsettle the fixed narrative, offering openings for sympathy and moral ambiguity. It claims that the trial process resulted in 'an unanimous verdict of guilty, with the entire concurrence and approbation of the Lords of Justiciary, who immediately passed sentence of death upon her' and ordered a post-mortem dissection.<sup>67</sup> The *Memoir* also reproduces a copy of the first petition, in which two hundred

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65. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 20.

66. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 31.

67. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15.

people advocated for Margaret. The petitioners stated that 'the verdict proceeded entirely upon circumstantial evidence, and there is a strong probability that the deed may not have been committed by this unhappy convict'.<sup>68</sup> This petition demonstrates public demands for clemency in response to what was widely perceived as an overreliance on circumstantial evidence. What renders this more striking is that *The Trial* records the Lord Justice's own admission that the case was based solely on such evidence, revealing the judiciary's conscious participation in sustaining what appears to be a flawed verdict. This awareness is evident in the opening pages of *The Trial* chapbook, the Lord Justice, in his speech addressing the jury, declared:

[He] considered this case as one of a very important nature, and that it depended upon evidence of an entirely circumstantial description, a case in which the Jury would have to weigh all the evidence that had been brought before them, not to listen to any observations from any quarter, even from the Judge himself.<sup>69</sup>

The extract elucidates two fundamental aspects: first, the court's overt recognition of the case's dependence on circumstantial evidence, and second, the directive emphasising the jury's independent decision-making, free from external influences, including those stemming from the press coverage of the case and the judiciary. The Lord Justice's emphasis on such autonomy could carry nuanced implications, especially for female defendants. This directive might inadvertently undermine the crucial role of judicial guidance. Judges provide invaluable legal insights to ensure that trials adhere to established legal norms. By recommending that jurors disregard such input, the Lord Justice Clerk may have put them in a difficult position, requiring them to navigate the complexity of interpreting circumstantial evidence without the assistance of the judge's legal expertise. This situation becomes even more complicated when considering the potential for gendered biases to colour these interpretations. The Lord Justice Clerk's initial instruction, which

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68. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 17.

69. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 22.

seemingly advocated for impartiality, assumes a contrasting tone when compared to his subsequent comments after the jury's unanimous verdict: "The Lord Justice Clerk returned the Jury thanks for the attention they had all along paid to the case, and was happy to think they had agreed entirely in the opinion expressed by him (and which was also concurred in by Lord Pitmilly), in returning a verdict of Guilty".<sup>70</sup> His statement of happiness at the jury's total agreement with his and Lord Pitmilly's opinion could be seen as an endorsement of the verdict. This portrayal of judicial satisfaction implies that the outcome was not only anticipated but also welcomed by those in power. The stress on his personal reaction could be read as an indication of the weight the judiciary placed on achieving a verdict that resonated with their assessment of the case. This specific detail of the Lord Justice Clerk's pleasure paints a picture of a trial where the scales were perhaps tipped by the authorities' views and feelings towards the accused. Kilday argues that 'if a woman did breach accepted gendered norms through criminality at this time, she was "doubly damned" and was more likely to be viewed as a deviant than as a criminal, because not only was she simply breaking the law, but she also betraying the "notional" qualities of her sex'.<sup>71</sup>

The narrative structure of *The Trial* and the *Memoir* reveals a deliberate attempt to provoke debate. This framing is evident in how *The Trial* functions as a performance of justice—mimicking the patterns of an actual trial. The disclaimer reinforces this performative stance by stating: 'As an application has been transmitted to the fountain of mercy, in regard to the unfortunate individual who was the subject of the following Trial'.<sup>72</sup> Referring to the chapbook as 'following this trial' implies that the publication is not merely reporting events but positioning itself as an extension of

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70. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 23.

71. Kilday, *Women and Violent Crime*, 19.

72. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 1st ed. editions (1821), disclaimer page.

the judicial process. Its coverage is lengthy and detailed, at times offering contrasting, even multifaceted perspectives—unlike the newspapers, whose reporting on witness testimony was brief, blunt and unequivocally damning. *The Trial* serves as a representation of the state's rigid stance, detailing the judicial proceedings in a manner that supports the verdict. At the same time, the *Memoir* contains documents that argued not only against the verdict but also in favour of the plaintiff. The *Memoir* includes a death warrant, declarations, minutes, petitions, and letters defending Margaret and a narration of Shuttleworth's life from birth until the execution. It is within the *Memoir* that the petition is included, a document which disputes the fairness of the trial and suggests a miscarriage of justice. This petition is the pivotal element that compels readers to question the legitimacy of the legal proceedings detailed in *The Trial*. By presenting the petition, a collective expression of doubt within the narrative of the *Memoir*, the creator deliberately prompts readers to re-evaluate the data and assertions made in *The Trial*. This encourages literary activism, where the audience is urged to look beyond the surface narrative presented to them in the trial. It seems that the *Memoir*'s contents were geared towards generating dialogue and even a sophisticated scepticism towards legal protocol. This flexible dynamic is like that found in the chapbook *An Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway* (1831), which presents a multifaceted portrayal of John Holloway while simultaneously supporting his execution.<sup>73</sup>

There is another incident that reflects not only a dichotomy between the chapbook and its supplement but also another deliberate editorial effort to conceal. The *Memoir* includes a letter sent by the clergy to defend Margaret after the verdict, in which he states that 'I believe there are none of the clergy who at present attend her would wish any of the consultations they have had with her to

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73. Holloway et al., *Authentic and Faithful History of the Atrocious Murder of Celia Holloway* (1832).

be made public, the time will come when there will be no hesitation about such communications'.<sup>74</sup>

The clergy's assertion that 'the time will come when there will be no hesitation about such communications' presents an intriguing temporal dichotomy. This letter, written as a defence of Margaret while she was alive, gains a new dimension through its posthumous publication in the *Memoir*. The decision to include it after her death could be seen as a nod to an anticipated future where societal norms have evolved to the point of greater openness, yet its actual publication in the aftermath contradicts immediate transparency. It suggests that the clergy, or perhaps the printer, believed that the societal climate at the time of her death was not yet ready for such revelations. The inclusion of this anticipatory statement, along with the continued confidentiality of the discussions, serves to stir debate and reflection among readers. It invites them to consider not only the content of these private communications but also the broader implications for societal understanding and acceptance. The act of publishing the letter posthumously could be an attempt by the printer to engage the reader's curiosity about what was said while also laying the groundwork for future discourse that might view Shuttleworth's story through a lens cleared of the biases and scandals of her own time. A similar situation emerged when the outcome of the reinvestigation requested in the initial petition was not made public: 'The investigation was a secret, and what took place during it is not permitted to be published; but it is presumed nothing had been expiscated in favour of the prisoner, as no recommendation for the royal clemency was forwarded'.<sup>75</sup> The situation escalated when Margaret herself was denied access to the transcript of her trial while in prison at Perth: 'It had come to her knowledge in Perth that her trial had been published [presumably the first edition]; but

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74. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 16.

75. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 21.

for reasons unknown to the writer, it had not been deemed prudent to allow her a sight of it.<sup>76</sup> The clergy's hesitancy to make their consultations public further complicates the narrative, hinting at potentially sensitive information deemed unfit for public consumption. This assertion is reiterated during Shuttleworth's final days as she awaited the outcome of the reinvestigation that had been sanctioned because of the petitions. The *Memoir* describes her as being '[o]n Tuesday impatient, thinking that the answer to the petition might reach her Counsel in Edinburgh on that day, whilst she would be unable to learn its contents'.<sup>77</sup>

Another divergence is evident in the depiction of Margaret Shuttleworth's character. As a woman accused of a serious offence, Shuttleworth—like 'Sally Arsenic', the last woman publicly hanged in Essex in 1851—was symbolically shifted from the cultural category of 'female' to that of 'monster' or 'fiend': Sally through press reportage, and Shuttleworth through both newspaper coverage and *The Trial* chapbook.<sup>78</sup> *The Trial* vilifies Margaret, recasting her in the stark light of monstrosity and otherness. It consistently portrays Shuttleworth's behaviour as disturbing, offering multiple instances where she is depicted not only as a dangerous and disruptive force to her husband but also a menace to the broader community. The embellishment of her malevolence seems intended to underscore the societal implications of her conduct and potentially influence public perception against her. This portrayal is evident in several parts of *The Trial*, for example, when one witness states that the deceased expressed concern that 'his own life had been threatened, and he would not risk that of any

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76. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 23.

77. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 28.

78. Richard Singer, 'The Hideous Career of Sally Arsenic', in *New Series No 3 – Corpses and Candles* (Sydney: Frank Johnson Pty Ltd, 1954), 49–59, Trove, accessed 5 June 2025, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-71930965/view?sectionId=nla.obj-113415970&partId=nla.obj-81008475#page/n48/mode/1up>.

of his friends'.<sup>79</sup> This sentiment is emphasised in another testimony. It is noted that due to Shuttleworth's excessive drinking, 'neither Mr S. nor his customers were safe in the house'.<sup>80</sup> In yet another part, *The Trial* paints a bleak portrait of Shuttleworth's disposition, mentioning that 'at this period, her manners and language were of the rudest description', even avoiding detailing the harshness of her words, signifying they were too vile to be recorded.<sup>81</sup> Correspondingly, the servant Catherine M'Leod states that 'Shuttleworth and his wife lived happily when she was sober—she was often drunk. She was then very outrageous and cursed and swore. Often threw weapons at her husband, such as pokers and tongs'.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Jane M'Donald states, '[when] Pannel was the worse of liquor she behaved ill to the deceased'.<sup>83</sup> *The Trial* depicts Margaret as the drunk whose 'too much indulgence in spirituous liquors, had wrought [her] up to a species of frenzy which in the end proved fatal'.<sup>84</sup> This chapbook's heightened depiction influences public perception by highlighting her alleged vices and violent behaviour, fitting the mould of the 'monstrous feminine' in the context of societal fears and biases. This portrayal aligns with one end of the street literature spectrum, where solemnity gives way to sensationalism to secure reader interest and improve sales. Judith Knelman, in *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press*, asks: were women 'really as monstrous as they were depicted in broadsides, newspapers, and books?' She contends that 'women who killed were held in lower regard than men who killed, yet were considered more interesting to

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79. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 6.

80. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 6.

81. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 6.

82. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 10.

83. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 18.

84. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 24.

contemplate'.<sup>85</sup>

On the other hand, the *Memoir*, as a posthumous publication, offers a compelling counter-narrative that invites a more profound exploration of the contrasting portrayals it presents. Unlike *The Trial*, in which most witnesses depict Shuttleworth as a violent and morally depraved woman, the *Memoir* recasts her as a wrongly convicted figure—supported by loved ones who defended her in their letters and by members of the public who petitioned on her behalf. The *Memoir* meticulously delineates Shuttleworth's transformations, motivations, and societal implications, portraying her not just as a subject of communal disdain and legal scrutiny but as a multidimensional individual shaped by her surroundings, experiences, and inherent traits. The *Memoir* introduces verse immediately following the detailed narration of Shuttleworth's life, covering aspects from her parentage and childhood to her marriage and respectable reputation. These lines are taken from a longer poem published anonymously in *The Pocket Magazine of Classic and Polite Literature* in 1821, which the editor believes accurately portrays 'The Drunkard's Progress'.<sup>86</sup>

Quick the transition from applause to sin,  
The heart once opened the black tide rolls in,  
Breaks down the barrier feeble virtue rears,  
And in an hour destroys the work of years.<sup>87</sup>

The lines encapsulate Shuttleworth's stark fall from grace: 'Quick the transition from applause to sin'. This cadence incisively captures the public's fickle disposition, highlighting how swiftly societal accolades can turn into censure in the wake of alleged moral failure. It suggests that Margaret, once held in esteem, is now subjected to the harsh judgment of a community quick to renounce its

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85. Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 1.

86. *The Pocket Magazine of Classic and Polite Literature*, vol. 8 (London: John Arliss, 1821), 199.

87. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 6.

favour. 'The heart once opened the black tide rolls in' illustrates the vulnerability of one's reputation to scandal, where even a single perceived misstep can invite a deluge of scorn that washes away long-standing respectability. 'Breaks down the barrier feeble virtue rears' reflects on the fragile edifice of public virtue, which, despite being laboriously constructed over years, can be dismantled within moments by the overwhelming force of public opinion. In this light, the verse not only comments on the precariousness of Shuttleworth's moral standing but also critiques the societal dynamics that define and destroy reputations with equal force. Shuttleworth's supposed transgression and the ensuing public and legal judgements effectively obliterate her previously established reputation and life's work. The poetry reveals a character fluctuating between virtue and vice, commendation and condemnation, reflecting the multidimensional narrative constructed around her persona and circumstances.

The *Memoir* also illustrates how she was once revered and respected, as articulated by Ann Primroy, a friend who knew Margaret before she moved to Montrose and who was unwilling to believe that Margaret was capable of murder. Ann asserted that she 'can never think, nor will anyone on earth make [her] believe, that [Margaret's] disposition is changed in so short a time as to be the perpetrator of so heinous a crime as [she is] accused for'.<sup>88</sup> The *Memoir* also provided possible causes for Shuttleworth's change in character and sudden addiction to alcohol as being 'attributed to the speculation of the public house not turning out so successful as was anticipated, and in consequence her husband getting peevish'.<sup>89</sup> The term 'speculation' encapsulates the Shuttleworths' calculated risk in transitioning from a secure military life, where Mr Shuttleworth's sergeant role enabled significant savings, to their successful 'grocer and spirit-dealer' business, a venture marked by collaborative

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88. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 4-5.

89. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 6.

success and fiscal prudence to their leap into the public house sector imagining a similar reward.<sup>90</sup>

The gamble of the public house venture led to Mr Shuttleworth's growing spitefulness, which in turn contributed to Mrs Shuttleworth's tragic slide into alcohol addiction. As one account observed, 'she latterly indulged in the habit of drinking [...] this she attributed to the speculation of the public-house not turning out so successful as was anticipated, and in consequence her husband became peevish'.<sup>91</sup> This illustrates the perils inherent in such commercial endeavours. The *Memoir* also sheds light on Shuttleworth's life post-conviction in jail, detailing her constrained and altered desires for alcohol: 'from the time of her condemnation, Mrs Shuttleworth's behaviour was radically changed; she could not supply herself with spirituous liquors, as she had not the means, neither did her situation, or the regulations of the jail permit it: but she neither seemed to want or wish it'.<sup>92</sup> This depiction highlights how their disciplined, cooperative retail prosperity shifts to economic failure, thus exposing character flaws. The narrative demonstrates that earlier acts of prudence offered no immunity against subsequent misfortunes. Shuttleworth's transformation from an esteemed figure to one viewed as a societal menace, a shift ascribed chiefly to her drinking habits, serves to highlight the deep-seated biases she faced as a woman who deviated from conventional standards.

This contrast becomes even more striking when juxtaposed against the portrayal of her character in *The Trial* as opposed to the *Memoir*. It is in this comparison that the bias becomes palpable, providing a clear index of how her portrayal in *The Trial* emphasises the prejudices against her.

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90. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 5.

91. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 5-6.

92. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 16.

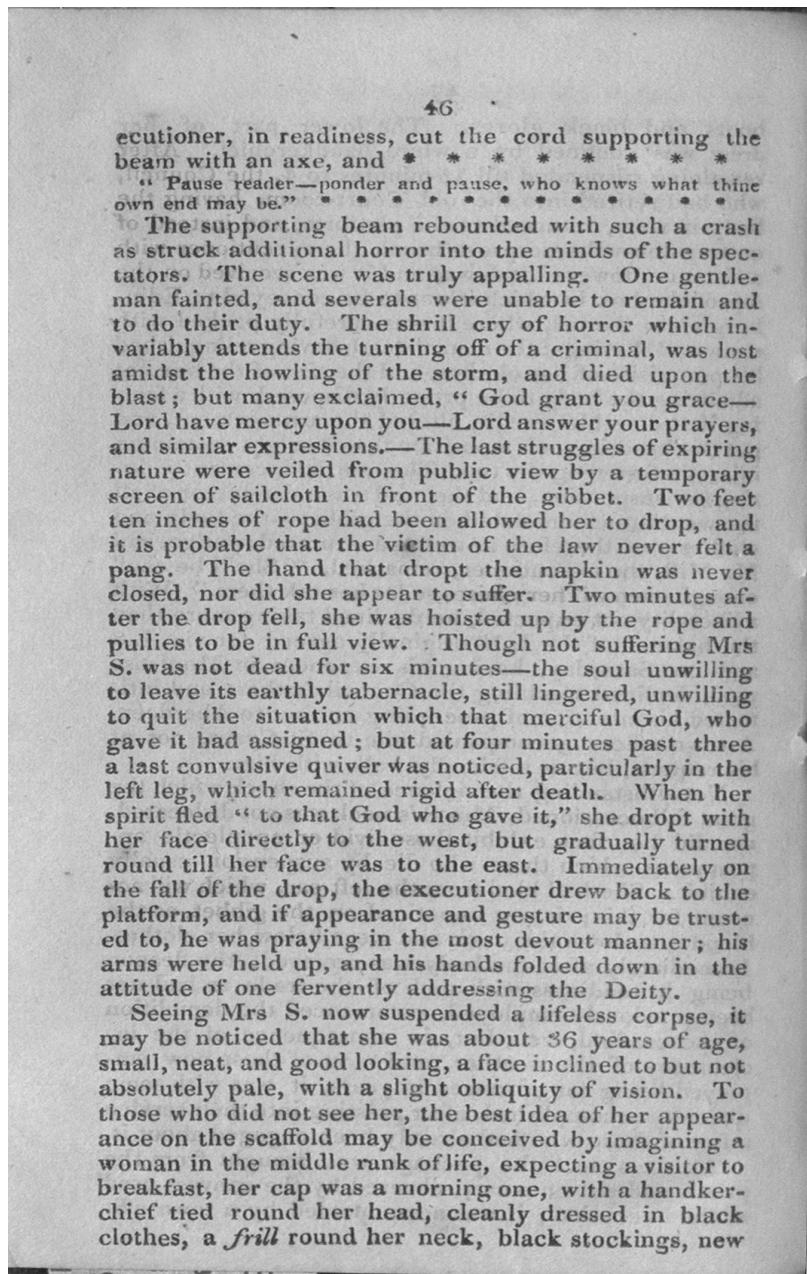


Figure 18. Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth (1821), 46.

As you can see in Figure 18, the *Memoir* states: ‘pause reader—ponder and pause, who knows what thine own end may be’, written exactly after the executioner cut the cord to send Margaret to her death.<sup>93</sup> Asterisks were placed before and after this direct address to highlight it visually. The rare editorial intervention dissolves the distance between the implied reader and Margaret, crafting a

93. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 46.

shared space of vulnerability and uncertainty regarding the operations of fate and justice. Asking the reader to 'pause and ponder' is more startling against the backdrop of a genre known for its immediacy. This instruction transforms the act of reading into an introspective event, challenging the norm of easy, quick consumption and elevating the text to a site for personal and societal reflection. It is not just an invitation to reflect on the precariousness of life but also to consider the social and moral judgments that one cast upon others.

The *Memoir* offers a narrative that restores a sense of humanity to Shuttleworth's character. Here, she is depicted not as a monster but as a flawed and fragile human being whose vices, such as drinking, are acknowledged, yet her guilt regarding the crime of murder is repeatedly questioned. This portrayal embodies the other end of the genre's spectrum, wherein cultural reflection and a deeper engagement with the subject's humanity prompt the reader to reconsider the harshness of societal judgment and the legal verdict. The contrasting portrayals between the chapbooks reflect the multifaceted nature of street literature, evoking both solemn judgment and empathetic understanding. These narratives do more than simply tell a story; they reflect society's views on crime and justice, potentially swaying public sentiment and even altering the course of justice. This influence was evident after the first edition of *The Trial* was published on October 11; by October 28, letters defending Margaret, penned by her lifelong friend Ann Primroy, had been submitted.<sup>94</sup> These, alongside petitions and additional correspondence in defence of Margaret, led to the 'Government grant[ing] the following respite for one month'.<sup>95</sup> Considering *The Trial* as a purportedly verbatim account of the trial also offers an implicit critique of the legal process itself. It suggests that the legal system may have played a significant role in demonising her, a sentiment that

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94. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 4-5.

95. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 20.

the public seemed to recognise, prompting them to submit petitions. The *Memoir*, in its deliberate inclusion of Shuttleworth's background story and the publication of various trial documents attested to by Margaret herself—as exemplified by the declaration signed by John M. Grigor—implicitly expresses sympathy toward her.<sup>96</sup> Even the indication of omissions, 'Eight words deleted [...] before signing', signifies an intent to challenge the established narrative.<sup>97</sup> It invites readers to reconsider the prevailing societal and legal judgments of the time. Such editorial choices could signify an underlying effort to present a counter-narrative, one that possibly casts Margaret in a more empathetic light.

Although the two chapbooks are formally linked, *The Memoir* is explicitly presented as a 'Supplement' in the disclaimer of both extant editions of *The Trial*.<sup>98</sup> Yet, when read separately, they appear as independent publications due to the glaring disparities in their portrayals of the case. It appears that the editors of *The Trial* and the *Memoir* intentionally created the chapbooks differently to serve distinct purposes. This intent is manifest in the editor's decision to include the Lord Justice Clerk's initial directive to the Jury in *The Trial* to 'weigh all the evidence that had been brought before them, not to listen to any observations from any quarter, even from the Judge himself', which implies a strong desire to appear unbiased. The significance here lies in the editor's awareness of the inherent impact such remarks could have on the jury's impartiality.<sup>99</sup> This framing makes it seem that *The Trial* was designed to regulate and steer public perception in a specific way, potentially at the cost of Shuttleworth's voice and the broader course of justice, by leaving out key information that

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96. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 8.

97. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 8.

98. See the disclaimer of *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821).

99. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 22.

would be vital to her advocates, including those seeking royal clemency. The *Memoir*, in contrast, provides a narrative that might be more aligned with a multidimensional portrayal of Shuttleworth's life. *The Trial* mimics an official transcript of the trial; it details the immediate events of the murder, including witness testimonies and the court proceedings, while the *Memoir* offers a more novelistic chronicle of Shuttleworth's life from childhood to her execution. Each text compensates for the other's gaps and omissions; where *The Trial* leaves questions of character and motivation to the reader's imagination, the *Memoir* delves into Margaret's backstory. Read together, the texts weave a more layered and nuanced narrative, presenting a holistic view of Margaret not merely as a figure of societal contempt and judicial examination but as a fully realised individual sculpted by her upbringing, relationships and personality traits.

#### 2.1.4 The Broadsides

The two broadsides concerning Margaret Shuttleworth, while sharing much of the same text, diverge significantly in tone and emphasis, offering a compelling case study of how seemingly minor editorial variations shape narrative perspective.<sup>100</sup> 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth' casts her in the role of a husband murderer, focusing on her conviction and supplying a narrative of guilt. Conversely, the other broadside, 'Execution: A Full, True and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret Tyndal or Shuttleworth', portrays her as a victim of injustice, drawing attention to the frailty of the circumstantial evidence and potential

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100. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth, for the Murder of Her Husband, on Friday the 7th December Last, 1821, at Montross [Montrose], near Edinburgh', broadside, *The Word on the Street*, National Library of Scotland, accessed 10 May 2023, <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=16706>; 'Execution: A Full, True and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret Tyndal or Shuttleworth, Who Was Executed at Montrose on Friday Last the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1821 for the Murder of Her Husband ... with Her Last Dying Words and Behaviour at the Place of Execution', broadside, consulted at the Special Collections, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

judicial shortcomings. These contrasting representations highlight the decisive impact that storytelling tropes can have on public perception and historical understanding.

‘An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth’,<sup>101</sup> by presenting the woman as ‘MRS SHUTTLEWORTH’ in the title—using a larger font size and full capital letters—anchors her identity within the matrimonial context of the crime (see Figure 19).

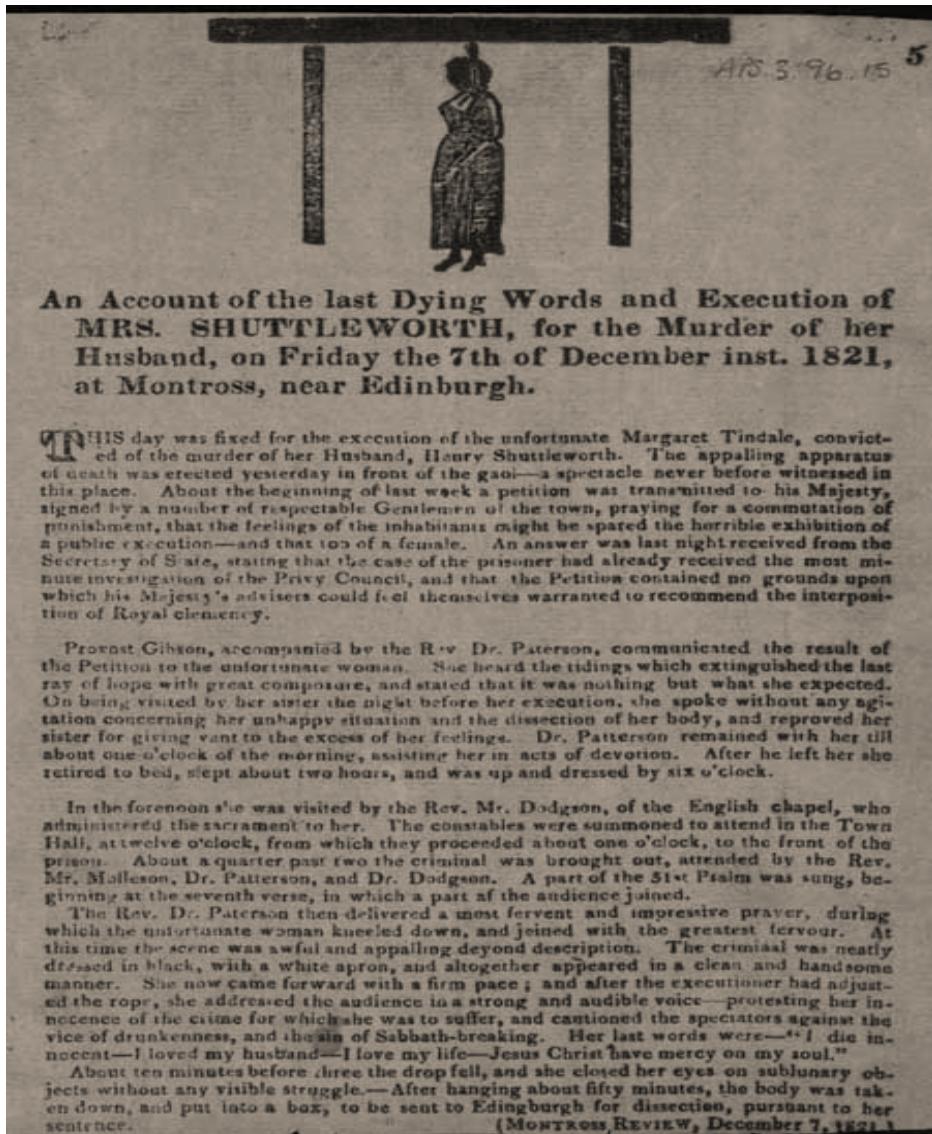


Figure 19. ‘An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution Mrs. Shuttleworth’, broadside (1821).

101. ‘An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth’, broadside (1821).

This visual typographic strategy heightens the personal and intimate nature of the transgression, implicating her not only as a murderer but as a wife who has violated societal expectations of marital loyalty and subservience. Another strategic deviation appears in the main text, where she is reintroduced and solidified as the ‘unfortunate Margaret Tindale’. Reverting to her maiden name ‘Tindale’ despite being recognised as ‘Shuttleworth’ in the title, insinuates that her crime is so appalling that it necessitates a symbolic severance from the matrimonial bond, almost a reversion to a pre-marital state where she is stripped of the respectability that marriage conferred upon women, positioning her as an aberration, both morally and socially. This symbolic disassociation not only underscores the severity of her crime but also adheres to patriarchal norms that situate women as requiring the governance and protection of a male authority figure, a father or husband, as indicated by Shoemaker earlier. It amplifies the emotional impact of Shuttleworth’s execution and subsequent dissection by conceptually ‘dissecting’ her identity, stripping her of a marital name.

On the other hand, the second broadside ‘Execution. A Full, True, and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret Tyndal, or Shuttleworth’ recognises Margaret under both surnames. This duality in naming acknowledges her complex identity, extending beyond her role as a wife, and reflects Margaret not just as a perpetrator of marital betrayal but as a woman with her own backstory, highlighting her origins, her life’s journey, and the social narratives surrounding women’s autonomy and agency. The broadside opens with:

THIS unhappy woman was Tried at the last Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth, for the Murder of her Husband, and condemned on circumstantial evidence, to be executed at Montrose, on Friday the 9th of November, and her body to be given for public dissection. The Government, however, was twice petitioned in her favour. The first obtained a reprieve of one month, and the second had no success.<sup>102</sup>

In the unfolding account of Shuttleworth’s ordeal, the decision to focus on her prosecution based

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102. ‘Execution: A Full, True and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret Tyndal or Shuttleworth’, broadside (1821).

solely on circumstantial evidence casts a shadow of injustice over her story. ‘She heard the tidings, which extinguished the last ray of hope, with great composure, and stated that it was nothing but what she expected’, the document recounts, portraying her as a figure of dignity, stoicism and resilience in the face of her grim fate. The description of her attire for the execution, ‘neatly dressed in black with a white apron, and altogether appeared in a clean and handsome manner’, speaks volumes of her self-respect and the care she took to maintain her composure even in her final moments. This focus on her appearance contrasts sharply with the gruesome nature of the crime of which she was accused. Her voice, ‘strong and audible’, as she addressed the gathered crowd, belies the vulnerability of her position. In proclaiming, ‘I die innocent—I loved my husband—I love my life—Jesus Christ have mercy on my soul!’, she not only asserts her innocence but also reveals a deep sense of personal tragedy and a plea for divine grace. Notably, the broadside interprets Shuttleworth’s fortitude as a response to injustice, painting her as a steadfast victim. This portrayal stands in contrast to the introductory sentence added to the second edition of *The Trial*, which casts her cold demeanour in a more sinister light, implying a cold-blooded murderer. She emerges as a tragic figure, a personification of grace under pressure, wrongfully condemned, perhaps, in a deeply flawed judicial system.

Moving forward, it is crucial to explore the divergent treatments that men and women receive in published accounts of similar crimes. The disparity in representation often reflects ingrained gender biases, casting criminal men and women in starkly different lights. Such contrasts perpetuate gender stereotypes and affects the perception of culpability and temperament in public discourse. Examining these disparities offers insight into the socio-cultural dynamics that shaped historical narratives and continue to influence contemporary views on gender and justice. Taken together, these portrayals confirm that gendered discourse pervaded every format, yet the form of each publication shaped its tone and moral valence. The next section compares how such shifts played

out across male and female offenders.

## 2.2 Balancing the Scales: Gendered Disparities in Similar Legal Cases

This section undertakes a comparative analysis of Shuttleworth's case alongside two other judicial proceedings of analogous legal circumstances: one with a female defendant, Mary M'Kinnon, and the other a male defendant, John Kerr. This comparative analysis highlights how gender biases influence IPH representations in street literature. This scrutiny is not just about legal history; it also weighs the power of narrative strategies to mould public opinion and societal attitudes towards men and women accused of similar transgressions in historical contexts. M'Kinnon's case took place in 1823 in Scotland. She was a commercial sex worker who was found guilty of stabbing a client in the chest; he died a month later from his injuries. Although M'Kinnon's case is not strictly an instance of IPH, her inclusion is critical to this analysis because it exposes the blurred boundaries between different forms of female-perpetrated violence against men, where women who killed husbands, lovers, or clients were often represented within the same moral framework of passion, excess, and blame. As a sex worker accused of killing a client, she embodies the archetype of the 'fallen woman' and is subjected to intense moral scrutiny. Her case serves as a comparative lens through which to appraise the treatment of Margaret Shuttleworth, whose portrayal is similarly shaped by narratives of female excess, drunkenness, and moral collapse. This enquiry reveals how women accused of violence against men—whether 'respectable' wives or underclass sex workers—are often framed within the same gendered and moralising discourses. Importantly, beyond their differing professions, the two cases share several striking similarities: both involved women killing men, occurred within two years of each other, took place in Scotland, involved defendants from similar financial backgrounds, and resulted in executions following not-guilty pleas.

The broadside 'An Interesting Account of the Trial and Sentence of Mary M'kinnon' includes her

description of what happened:

She had left her house on the 8th February, on a visit to her neighbour; during her absence a riot took place. That the deceased, along with others, in a state of intoxication, came into her house, broke the furniture, violently assaulted the females who lived in her house, she herself being absent; and when she returned, was herself knocked down; and if the deceased sustained any injury at her hand, she did not know of it.<sup>103</sup>

Despite numerous witness testimonies asserting that the deceased and his accomplices had attacked M'kinnon and other women in her tavern and caused significant damage to her property, she was, nonetheless, convicted. She was subsequently sentenced to be executed and dissected in public, a sentence that mirrored Shuttleworth's. The crucial role of circumstantial evidence, where prior transgressions were witnessed and recorded, showcasing Shuttleworth as a danger to her husband, served to justify her execution. Therefore, its absence in M'kinnon's case should have logically led to the dismissal of charges against her. This scenario contradicts Bennett's depiction of the Scottish legal system, where criminal trials typically ensued only when the evidence against the accused was considered 'effectively incontrovertible'.<sup>104</sup> In this context, the broadsides enable the public to see the grossly unfair treatment of women, or perhaps specifically those who diverged from idealised feminine roles. Figures like Shuttleworth, with her alcohol dependency, or M'Kinnon, with her profession, are portrayed as transgressors and faced an unsympathetic legal system that was often devoid of mercy or fair consideration when such figures were accused of murder. This biased treatment is also evident in the depiction of the case in the article 'Execution of Marry M'Kinnon'

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103. 'An Interesting Account of the Trial and Sentence of Mary M'kinnon, Who Is to Be Executed at Edinburgh, on Wednesday, April 16th next, for the Murder of William Howat, by Stabbing Him in the Breast with a Table Knife, and Her Body given for Public Dissection', broadside (Edinburgh: Printed for James, 1823), *The Word on the Street*, National Library of Scotland, accessed 18 April 2023, <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=15348&transcript=1>.

104. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland*, 220.

published in *Inverness Courier* on April 24th, 1823.<sup>105</sup> The article recounts the details of the trial, the verdict, and the execution spectacle. However, the concluding paragraph is striking:

A most extraordinary deception had been practised by this unfortunate woman, which she kept up almost to the very last. It appears that her name was not M'kinnon but M'Innes, [...] it appears she had been mistaken for the daughter of a Quartermaster M'Kinnon, and found it in her interest to keep up the deception, which was the cause of the evidence given by the Captain Brown on her trial.<sup>106</sup>

Here was a woman, seemingly desperate to convince the courts and the public of her innocence, yet who also, for reasons not entirely clear, chose to hide behind a facade. The article's deliberate choice to end with this revelation is intriguing, prompting us to question whether it serves as a calculated ploy for dramatic effect. By introducing an element of mystery, the article not only invites speculation but also encourages readers to ponder the complexities of the woman's plight. The ambiguity surrounding her motives also raises doubts about the true nature of her actions and the author's intent. Could this revelation be intentionally shrouded in mystery to cast doubt on the woman's credibility, leaving readers to grapple with uncertainty? The editorial ploy may be to fix M'Kinnon in a suspicious light, casting her as a master manipulator. The narrative, then, is not just about a woman who may have been wrongly executed but also a figure conducting an elaborate ruse right until her final moments. This choice, intentional or not, serves to undermine her pleas of innocence. It is as if the article suggests that even if she didn't commit the murder, she was guilty of subterfuge. Bennett claims that

The case of Mary McKinnon is noteworthy here as it was the only one, of the total five women executed for the murder of a stranger, that was not financially motivated, nor was there evidence of any premeditation. However, the circumstances surrounding both her profession and her place within the wider community were key factors that prompted the court to pass the death

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105. 'Execution of Mary M'kinnon', *Inverness Courier* (Inverness, Scotland), 24 April 1823, 4, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 June 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000446/18230424/018/0004>.

106. 'Execution of Mary M'kinnon', *Inverness Courier*, 24 April 1823.

sentence.<sup>107</sup>

Bennett indicates that her case was exceptional for its lack of premeditated criminal intent. Yet, it is this very aspect of personal deceit upon which the press seizes, painting her as a woman willing to manipulate social structures for personal gain. This representation moves beyond the legal facts, constructing a character sketch that reflects the era's predilection for cautionary tales. The act of deception becomes a focal point, overshadowing other aspects of her life and crimes, and thus becomes a literary device to underscore themes of duplicity and the downfall that often follows. In contrast, the broadside offers a detailed, almost theatrical account of the events and trial, drawing readers into the courtroom drama and the emotional journey of the defendant. It spotlights the chaos of the riot, the assault on the women in Mary's house, and her subsequent distress—elements that humanise her and possibly generate public sympathy. Thus, the treatment of both women illustrates how gendered narratives in law and print culture converged to construct femininity itself as a site of danger and deviance. Turning now to John Kerr's case allows a fuller understanding of how masculinity operated within the same cultural and juridical framework, offering a crucial counterpoint that clarifies the gendered imbalance evident in the preceding examples.

### 2.2.1 John Kerr: A Male counterpart

Considering the existing evidence that suggests a significant bias in the cases of M'Kinnon and Shuttleworth, a comparison with a male equivalent is integral to affirm or refute the assumption of gendered discrepancies in street literature accounts of IPH. John Kerr presents a pertinent comparison to Shuttleworth; both were Scottish, and both were condemned for murdering a spouse within six years of each other. Both were under the influence of alcohol, and Kerr killed his wife

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107. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse*, 99.

using a barrel stave, like Shuttleworth's alleged usage of a poker.<sup>108</sup> However, the distinctions between their legal processes, as portrayed in the press and street literature, diverge sharply, pointing to inherent gender prejudices.

The broadside 'Execution: A Correct Account of the Execution of John Kerr' claims that Kerr 'has been quite resigned to his fate, acknowledging the justice of his sentence'.<sup>109</sup> Both Kerr and Margaret Shuttleworth are depicted as accepting their fate, yet the nature of their acceptance diverges sharply. Kerr's resignation arises from an acknowledgment of his guilt and the legitimacy of his punishment, whereas Shuttleworth's stems from a sense of inevitability—the expectation that her claims of innocence will not be believed and that execution is unavoidable: 'I am not disappointed, as I never expected anything else'.<sup>110</sup> While Shuttleworth's account challenges the fairness of her trial, Kerr's portrayal emphasises his acknowledgement of the sentence's justice, functioning as a didactic element that conveys a moral lesson on legal conformity and penitence. By portraying Kerr as accepting of his conviction, the broadside reinforces the notion that justice has been served following both legal and moral standards. This narrative device may have been intended to educate the public about the consequences of crime and the perceived righteousness of the legal system, thereby advocating for the rule of law and the importance of upholding societal norms.

Given the parallel circumstance that both Shuttleworth and Kerr, driven by the haze of intoxication, killed their respective partners, it lays bare a glaring disparity in societal treatment of

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108. 'Execution: A Correct Account of the Execution of John Kerr, Who Suffered at Greenock, on Wednesday the 6th of June 1827, for the Cruel and Barbarous Murder of His Own Wife, with an Account of His Behaviour since His Condemnation and on the Scaffold, and His Affecting and Interesting Address to the Numerous Spectators', broadside (Glasgow: W. Carse, 1827), *The Word on the Street*, National Library of Scotland, accessed 21 May 2023, <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=14727&transcript=1>.

109. 'Execution: A Correct Account of the Execution of John Kerr', broadside (1827).

110. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 32.

their actions based on gender. Kerr's indulgence in alcohol was proffered as a mitigating factor for his crime, potentially diminishing his moral liability. 'Execution: A Correct Account of the Execution of John Kerr' broadside states that '[h]e was married about 30 years, and lived very agreeable together for a considerable time, till drink, the bane of every evil, became the ruling propensity of both, and created disturbances at various times, which ended in the tragical event above narrated'.<sup>111</sup> The broadside's mention of the couple having 'lived very agreeable together for a considerable time' until the shared indulgence in 'drink' led to 'disturbances' insinuates that the victim played a role in her fate. It propagates the notion that the 'tragical event' was not merely the outcome of Kerr's actions but rather a culmination of mutual failings and collective moral decay within the marital relationship. The article 'Execution of John Kerr', published in *Sun* on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1827, even went as far as to blame the victim for the murder—a rhetorical move that echoes the treatment of Holloway in street literature, where male perpetrators of IPH are framed as victims of unfortunate circumstances, despite their confessions. It states:

It is not surprising that the capital punishment of Kerr should have excited a strong sensation, as besides the rarity of execution in this town, he had been so long domiciled in Greenock as to be generally known. There were circumstances in his case likewise, which, while they marked him out as a not unfit object for the Royal clemency, created a feeling of commiseration in his behalf. The irregular habits of the woman to whom he had been united for the long period of thirty years, had for a considerable portion of time destroyed his domestic comfort—it is that he had often exhibited extreme indulgence toward her; in her irreclaimable thirst for ardent spirits, and even in the fatal catastrophe which arose out of an indulgence of this unfortunate propensity, though his passion had triumphed over his better feelings, and even his reason, there was no evidence of premeditation in the deed. His disposition was not naturally either cruel or revengeful.<sup>112</sup>

Kerr is cast in a sympathetic light here, framing him with leniency and suggesting a degree of victimisation due to his wife's 'irregular habits'. It is crucial to note that the wife's 'irreclaimable

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111. 'Execution: A Correct Account of the Execution of John Kerr', broadside (1827).

112. See 'Execution of John Kerr', *Sun* (London), 11 June 1827, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 22 June 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002194/18270611/011/0003>.

thirst for ardent spirits' is detailed, subtly constructing a narrative where her conduct becomes a focal point, overshadowing Kerr's actions and locating her as the architect of her tragedy. There is an implicit assertion that her behaviour destroyed his 'domestic comfort', implying Kerr was a man snared in a tumultuous daily existence by his wife's misdeeds. The phrase, 'it is that he had often exhibited extreme indulgence toward her', amplifies this bias—Kerr a kindly and patient husband tolerating his wife's flaws, thereby sanctifying his endurance. It insinuates that his restraint under the circumstances was commendable. Remarkably, the narrative takes pains to assert the lack of 'premeditation in the deed' and how his disposition was 'not naturally either cruel or revengeful'—a straightforward endeavour to humanise him and dilute the severity of his moral and criminal culpability. His 'passion' is said to have 'triumphed over his better feelings, and even his reason'—the crime was a momentary lapse, rather than a manifestation of his deepest drives. In Kerr's case, the female victim's flaws are magnified to overshadow the male perpetrator's response, thus shifting the blame and creating a narrative that justifies, to an extent, Kerr's violence.

In stark contrast, the depiction of Shuttleworth's drinking is devoid of such leniency or subtlety. The article 'Summer Assizes' published in *General Evening Post*, averred that 'the Lord Justice Clerk then proceed to pass the dreadful sentence of the law, urging upon the prisoner the heinousness of her crime, aggravated as it had been, instead of mitigated, by the state of intoxication in which she appeared to have been at the time'.<sup>113</sup> Kerr's intoxication serves as an extenuating circumstance, a source of diminished responsibility, a byproduct of impaired judgement, so reducing the perceived severity of his actions. Shuttleworth's drinking meanwhile is couched in very different terms. Her inebriation is an aggravating factor, amplifying her guilt and the perceived viciousness of her crime. In this scenario, drinking seems to exacerbate her liability, leading to stricter judgment. A similar

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113. 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter*, 6 October 1821.

stance is outlined in the article 'At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth', published in the *Observer of the Times* (September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1821):

Katherine Macleod, who was servant to Shuttleworth, said, that the pannel and her husband lived on very good terms, except when she got drunk, which was frequent, and then she was outrageous with her tongue, and sometimes threw the poker and tongs at her master. She identified a poker shown as the kitchen poker which was used, and which she had missed on the Friday previous to her master's death. The pannel had some words with her husband in the evening. He retired; but she continued her scolding, and drove her hand through the kitchen window. Witness afterwards put pannel to bed, but did not undress her; for she was so drunk that she could not go to bed without assistance, Pannel's bed was on the ground floor; and the deceased's (for they did not sleep together) was up stairs. At ten o'clock at night, the witness shut up the shop and secured the premises in the usual way. It being the market-day, Shuttleworth himself had got some drink, but he was not intoxicated; neither was there any appearance of wounds about him.<sup>114</sup>

The disproportionate representation in this article is blatant: Shuttleworth's drinking and subsequent behaviour are magnified and elaborated. At the same time, her husband's alcohol use is quickly downplayed with the claim that he drank less than she did. Shuttleworth is the unruly offender, and her husband is absolved as the luckless victim. The frequent references to her intoxication and aggressive demeanour, contrasts sharply with the sparse and dismissive acknowledgement of her husband's behaviour. The editor's parenthetical note that 'they did not sleep together', invites the reader to see past their mutual vice of alcoholism and consider the unique aspects of their moral conduct. Continuing this narrative, the 'Circuit Court of Justiciary' published in *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* (1st October 1821) provides a further example of the skewed representation of Shuttleworth and her husband's behaviours:

From the evidence of the servant and neighbours, it appeared that the prisoner was addicted to drunkenness, and, while in this state, beat and otherwise abused her husband, the deceased. On the afternoon preceding the fatal event, prisoner was intoxicated, and very outrageous towards deceased. He had been threatening, about this time, not to reside with his wife, on account of her misconduct. They were alone in the house, that evening, the servant having been permitted to attend a late wake, in the vicinity; previous to which she had, by her master's desire, put her

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114. 'At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth', *Observer of the Times* (London), 30 September 1821, 1, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 17 June 2023,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002639/18210930/007/0001>.

inebriated mistress to bed. Prisoner and deceased slept in separate beds. About 4 in the morning, prisoner awoke one of her neighbours, saying she had 'found Shuttleworth lying in the entry'.<sup>115</sup>

The passage gives a candid illustration of the one-sided storytelling at play. The servant and neighbours' 'evidence' forms a narrative that is heavily weighted against the prisoner, emphasising her alcohol dependency and alleged abuse of her husband. Terms such as 'intoxicated', 'outrageous', 'misconduct', and 'inebriated' paint a picture of a woman out of control, the sole catalyst for the tragic event. The extract reflects the prevailing societal and gender biases. Men were often portrayed in narratives that softened or even justified their transgressions. Meanwhile, women faced ruthless scrutiny, their behaviours framed as embodiments of moral and societal decay. Knelman supports this contention: 'women's bodies were meant for giving and sustaining life, not for stamping it out. So, a woman who killed her baby or flew into a rage and murdered her husband was out of control. She would have to die on the gallows as an example to others'.<sup>116</sup> She adds that '[when] the perpetrators of spousal abuse were women, they were vilified. [...] but a man in her position would most likely have escaped hanging'.<sup>117</sup>

Another crucial aspect to examine is the nature of public engagement with male and female convicts, particularly through the lens of execution attendance, as spectator numbers were frequently reported in contemporary accounts. For M'Kinnon, 'an immense crowd of people, we should suppose between 20,000 and 30,000, witnessed the execution, a number of whom, we understand, had arrived on the preceding day from various parts of the country'.<sup>118</sup> Such a staggering number of spectators indicates the extent of societal condemnation and curiosity around a woman who had

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115. 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 October 1821.

116. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 3.

117. Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 93.

118. 'Execution of Mary M'kinnon', *Inverness Courier*, 24 April 1823.

seemingly transgressed the established codes of genteel femininity. This intense public scrutiny and high attendance at her execution reveals perhaps a morbid obsession with 'deviant' women and a public appetite to witness their downfall. Shuttleworth's execution attracted 4,000 spectators, as noted in the *Memoir*, a turnout reduced by poor weather and prevailing uncertainties regarding a potential clemency:

The scene now was awfully solemn and impressive. Probably, by half past one\* 3 to 4000 spectators were assembled; by 2 they exceeded 4000, of which a large proportion were females; small portions of the crowd were counted, and gave nearly equal results; one-third of the whole might be from the country. The crowd would have been much greater, but for the circumstances of the execution not being certain till the preceding evening, and the very unpleasant weather.<sup>119</sup>

The fact that the *Memoir* provided such explanations implies that, under normal circumstances, the public interest and turnout for her execution would have been significantly higher, reinforcing the notion of societal fascination and condemnation for female transgressors. Though the weather was 'unpleasant', the turnout for Shuttleworth was substantial, especially when contrasted with Kerr's mere 400 spectators.<sup>120</sup> The significant public attendance at the executions, particularly when the condemned was a woman, may parallel the consumption patterns of street literature, as evidenced by the multiple editions of *The Trial* chapbook. The fact that the first edition sold out indicates a strong interest in such cases, akin to the draw of a public hanging. The public read and debated these highly spiced narratives with an eagerness that mirrors their attendance at executions—a dramatic and macabre entertainment or 'blood sport'. The parallel between public executions and the narrative spectacle offered by sensational street literature is telling. This convergence of public execution and lurid printed matter reveals how gender shaped not only legal outcomes but also the emotional

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119. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 38.

120. See 'Execution of John Kerr', *New Times* (London), 12 June 1827, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 13 September 2023, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002357/18270612/028/0004>.

economy of crime in the nineteenth century—where women's perceived deviance became a source of both fascination and moral instruction.

The *Memoir*'s observation that a large proportion of the crowd at Shuttleworth's execution was female gestures towards an implied audience for this moral instruction. This implied audience is likewise emphasised via her final words on the scaffold, as reported in the *Memoir*:

[S]he in a shrill feminine voice said, 'O! beware of drunkenness, it is a vice that has been my ruin. I caution all against this sin, especially the female world. Beware of drunkenness and of threatening words, these have brought me to this place. O! keep the Sabbath day holy, I wish much I had better attended to the practice of this duty.' These words were repeated after her by the Rev. Dr. in the most impressive manner, and distinctly heard by the spectators.<sup>121</sup>

Her admonition, allegedly delivered in a 'shrill feminine voice', might not truly be her own, raising suspicions of editorial intervention or moralistic colouring by those documenting the event. This decision to focus on the 'female world' raises critical questions about the motivations behind such portrayals. Was it part of a didactic campaign, a dramatised act for the execution's audience, or an effort to recast her life and behaviour within the gendered expectations of the era?

Walsh, in her study addressing historical depictions of domestic murder in press reports and street literature in the early nineteenth century, contends:

Through an examination of these publications, it will become clear that domestic murder held a huge fascination for all sections of society, but such fascination was tempered in equal parts with genuine concerns that the health of the nation would be undermined by any disruption to the domestic space. As a result of these fears, the earlier decades of the century saw a degree of consensus in how such crimes were reported, regardless of the professed readership of the publication; this consensus was a means not only of preserving the domestic space, but also of minimizing the potential for class unrest that the nature of these crimes, and the subsequent punishment meted out to the perpetrators, might potentially have aroused. The primary means by which an appearance of social consensus was achieved through the reporting of these crimes was by the adoption of melodramatic tropes.<sup>122</sup>

Walsh claims that at the time, a unifying method was employed in domestic crime reporting, which

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121. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45.

122. Walsh, 'The Demon in the Dock', 13.

utilised melodramatic tropes to forge an apparent social consensus. However, my analysis of Margaret Shuttleworth and the comparable case of John Kerr—both of similar socio-economic backgrounds, both Scottish, and both having killed their spouse while intoxicated—complicates this thesis. In the popular press, instead of a cohesive narrative aimed at upholding the sanctity of the domestic sphere and curbing the threat of class-based unrest, what unfolds is a polyphony of contrasting representations, heavily tinged with gender bias: men are more sympathetically portrayed, while women are vilified. By contrast, while street literature amplifies Holloway's voice and largely silences Shuttleworth's, it nevertheless creates space for her defence—as seen in the *Memoir*, where her friend's letter, the acknowledgment of her past virtue, and the voices of petitioners offer alternative perspectives. Similarly, *An Authentic and Faithful History of Holloway*, though sympathetic, ultimately endorses his execution. These representational choices enable a more multidimensional portrayal than the more rigid, gender-biased narratives of the popular press. This variability challenges Walsh's claim of a uniform representation of IPH across both press and street literature.

### 2.3 Christian Traditions in Margaret Shuttleworth's Case

Christianity has historically been the dominant religion in Scotland and continues to exert significant cultural influence in modern times. This section examines how prevailing Christian doctrines shaped public narratives of female criminality—how it was evaluated and punished—through the street literature depictions of the Shuttleworth case. In doing so, it examines how religion influenced both gendered portrayals and legal practices, providing insight into the broader moral and cultural landscape of early nineteenth-century Scotland. Andrew T. N. Muirhead explains that 'the [Scottish religious] situation can be summarised by looking at the 1851 Census of Scotland which shows

twenty denominations (not counting fifty-eight “isolated congregations”)?<sup>123</sup> His research registers the complex and multifaceted religious backdrop of Scotland during that period. The 1820s saw the emergence of Evangelicalism as a potent and distinct force within this religious milieu. Andrew Michael Jones argues that in Scotland ‘toward the end of the eighteenth century, the movement [Evangelicalism]—both within and outside of the national Church—began to gather strength and exert greater influence’.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, David W. Bebbington posits that ‘[Evangelicalism] has found expression in a variety of institutional forms, a wine that has been poured into many bottles’.<sup>125</sup> Bebbington highlights Evangelicalism’s pervasive influence across various facets of a nation’s cultural, social, political and legal landscape. However, despite its notable presence, Evangelicalism represents merely one facet of Scotland’s multi-denominational religious context. This section highlights how Christian denominations coexisted while negotiating internal contradictions, revealing how these clashing ideologies impacted depictions of convicted women, more specifically, husband-killers in early nineteenth-century Scotland. The street literature portrayals of the Shuttleworth case stand as a testament to this confluence of religion and law.

### 2.3.1 Visual Representations in *The Trial and the Memoir*

In *The Trial and the Memoir*, the visual power of written text transcends the need for pictorial imagery. Typographic design functions as a paratext, offering a visual narrative that deepens and directs the written account. The absence of illustrations is offset by a textual architecture of varied

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123. Andrew T. N. Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity: The Story of Scotland’s Churches, 1560 – 1960* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 5.

124. Andrew Michael Jones, *The Revival of Evangelicalism: Mission and Piety in the Victorian Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 6.

125. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London; Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1.

typography and layout, evoking Christian traditions through both form and content. The result is a dynamic visual medium that foregrounds the narrative's moral and religious dimensions, with Christian motifs woven into the lexical fabric of both accounts.

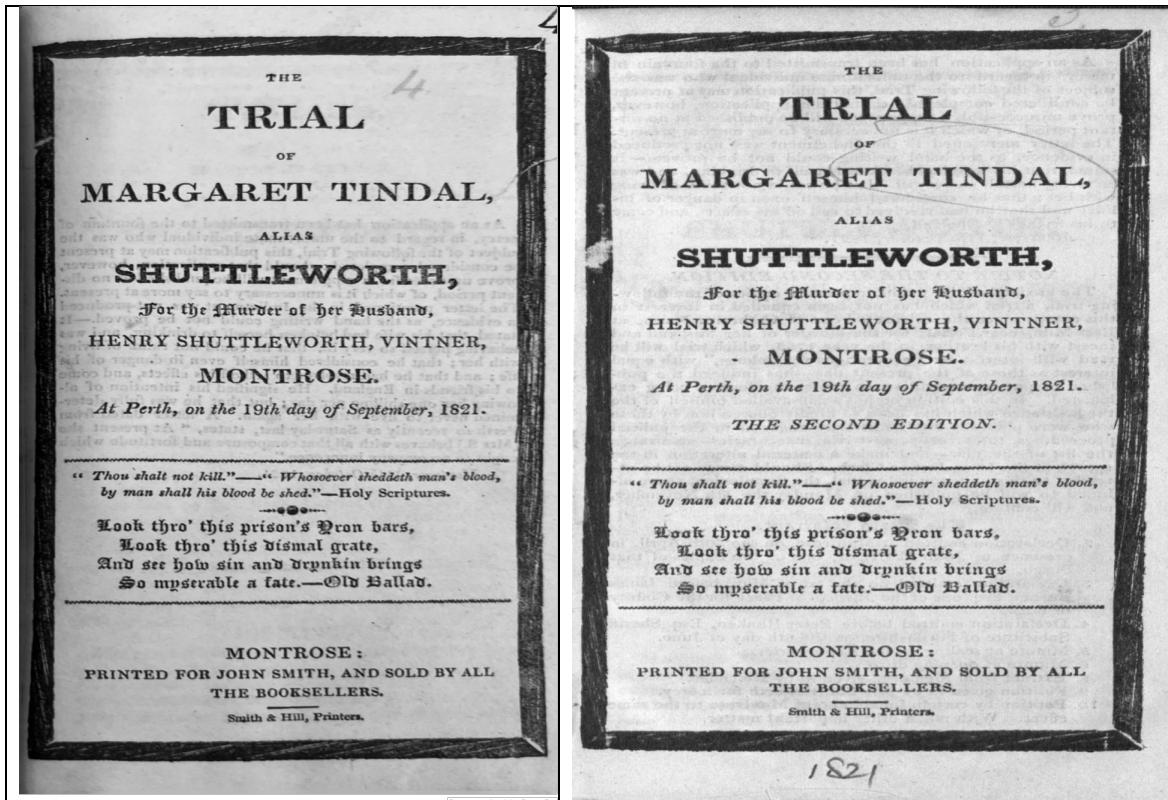


Figure 20. The cover page of *The Trial*, from left 1st edition and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1821

The first of these visual texts appears on *The Trial's* cover page; as shown in Figure 20, this cover remains unchanged across both editions.<sup>126</sup> From the outset, the distinct fonts and typographic arrangement of the biblical verses 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed' establishes the chapbook's didactic framework and set the tone for the narrative that follows. These verses, rooted in Christian theology, evoke a tension between opposing interpretations of justice. 'Thou shalt not kill' appears to condemn the death penalty, advocating for

126. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both edition (1821), cover page.

the sanctity of life, while 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood' legitimises capital punishment through the lens of retributive justice. The visual and textual tension between the two not only reflects but also intensifies the ethical ambiguities surrounding Shuttleworth's case, prompting a reflection on whether justice lies in mercy or vengeance. Their placement near each other visually heightens this juxtaposition in the centre of the page, separated from the chapbook's title above and the publication details below by two ornamental rules. Both verses appear in smaller italicised type, enclosed in quotation marks, separated only by an em-dash, and are explicitly sourced from 'Holy Scripture'.

The verses' placement alongside the dramatic font of the *Old Ballad*—which warns of the consequences of drunkenness within ornate typographic borders—signifies a deliberate moral framing that links sin, particularly intemperance, with the act of murder. The ballad's lines, 'Look thro' this prison's Iron bars, / Look thro' this dismal grate, / And see how sin and drunkin[sic] brings / So miserable[sic] a fate', evoke a vivid scene of confinement and spiritual ruin. This alignment visually and thematically underscores the notion that Shuttleworth's crime stems from both moral and spiritual failure. By situating the biblical verses directly above the ballad's sombre cautionary lines, *The Trial* prompts readers to construe her actions not merely as criminal but as symptomatic of a broader moral decline. This visual composition is designed to trigger a layered moral dialogue, implying how Shuttleworth's fate is both legally justified and spiritually instructive.

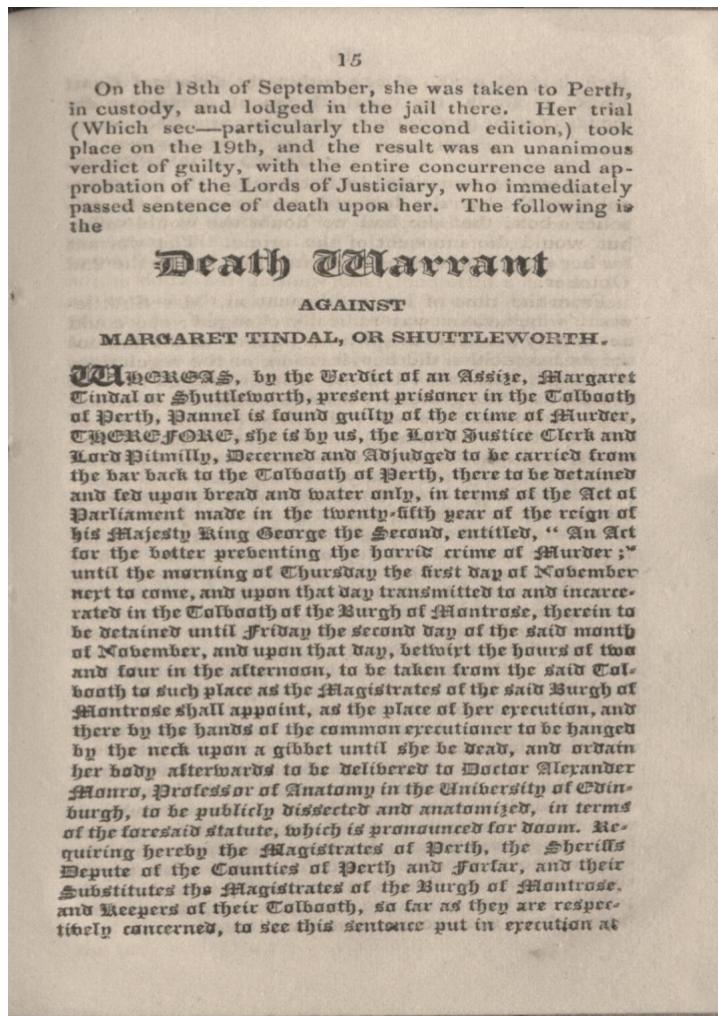


Figure 21. 'Death Warrant Against Margret Tindal or Shuttleworth', *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15.

Figure 21 illustrates how the *Memoir* uses typography and other design strategies to highlight the 'Death Warrant'.<sup>127</sup> Notably, it is the only text in the chapbook distinguished by a blackletter font. According to Paul C. Gutjahr: 'Blackletter was traditional in Bible printing because it recalled monastic scribal production and thus staked a claim to authority through that textual tradition: God

127. 'Death Warrant', in *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15.

speaks in blackletter'.<sup>128</sup> The 'blackletter' font selection by the printer, when viewed alongside the Church of Scotland's consequentialist views on justice as described in 'The Death Penalty' (discussed below), suggests a deliberate effort to convey how the death penalty aligns with divine order. This document highlights the roles of deterrence, protection, and rehabilitation within the justice system, with which the Scottish public would have been familiar. The use of 'blackletter', with its historical gravitas and formality, reinforces the notion that capital punishment is not only a legal necessity but a mandate of God to maintain order within civilised society.<sup>129</sup> The typographic selection of blackletter, with its vertical emphasis and intricacies, trigger both reverence and trepidation, akin to the complex emotions elicited by the portrayal of the Christian deity in liturgical practice and iconography. The document's visual aesthetics reflect an era where legal pronouncements were imbued with the ethos of Christian morality. The strategic use of blackletter font is not merely a stylistic flourish. It is a symbolic alignment of legal judgment with the Christian paradigm of divine justice, intimating that the secular court's rulings are in concert with the celestial court's decrees. Such visual and textual synergy with Christian traditions serves to reinforce the legitimacy and weight of the legal sentence. In this context, the legal institution is envisaged as an executor of God's will, dispensing justice that resonates with the religious and moral convictions of the period. Simon McFadden posits that 'Christian morals has been used as a tactic to both promote and demote support for capital punishment in Scotland'.<sup>130</sup> The Church of Scotland's booklet, 'The Death Penalty', expands on McFadden's argument by exploring the various positions on capital

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128. Paul C. Gutjahr, 'The Letter(s) of the Law: Four Centuries of Typography in the King James Bible', in *Illuminating Letters: Typography and Literary Interpretation*, edited by Paul C. Gutjahr and Megan Benton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 45.

129. The Church of Scotland and Church and Society Council, *The Death Penalty*, (2008), 3.

130. Simon McFadden, *Exploring the History and Cultural Representation of Capital Punishment in Scotland* (master's thesis, Edinburgh Napier University, 2020), 34

punishment held by different denominations.<sup>131</sup> In the Old Testament, the mandate from Genesis 9:6, which decrees that whoever sheds human blood by humans shall their blood be shed, emphasises the sacred value of human life, as humans are made in the image of God. In contrast, the New Testament presents a more nuanced perspective; Jesus does not explicitly oppose the death penalty. Some interpret this passive attitude as support for or, at the very least, acquiescence in it. Throughout the Middle Ages and Reformation, there was widespread acceptance within the Roman Catholic Church of the state's right and necessity to carry out capital punishment. This acceptance was grounded in the belief that while the church itself should not be bloodthirsty, 'Ecclesia non sitit sanguinem', the civil authorities were deemed the proper executors of such a sentence. However, since the Enlightenment, with Cesare Beccaria's influential critique, and into the mid-twentieth century, a theological consensus has emerged across both Protestant and Catholic lines generally opposing the death penalty, though seldom advocating for an outright ban till the 'resolution of Parliament on 31 December 1969'.<sup>132</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles proposes that '[u]ntil at least the middle of the twentieth century it was generally agreed in the Catholic Church that the state had the right, and sometimes the duty, to impose the death penalty for certain heinous offences'.<sup>133</sup> This shifting theological discourse shapes not only the language used in the *Memoir* of Shuttleworth's final days, but also its visual staging—particularly in the typographic presentation of her final moments at the scaffold.

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131. The Church of Scotland and Church and Society Council, *The Death Penalty*, 7-12.

132. The Church of Scotland and Church and Society Council, *The Death Penalty*, 5.

133. Avery Cardinal Dulles, 'Catholic Teaching on the Death Penalty: Has It Changed?', in *Religion and the Death Penalty: A Call for Reckoning*, ed. Erik Owens, John D. Carlson, and Eric Elshtain (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2004), 23.

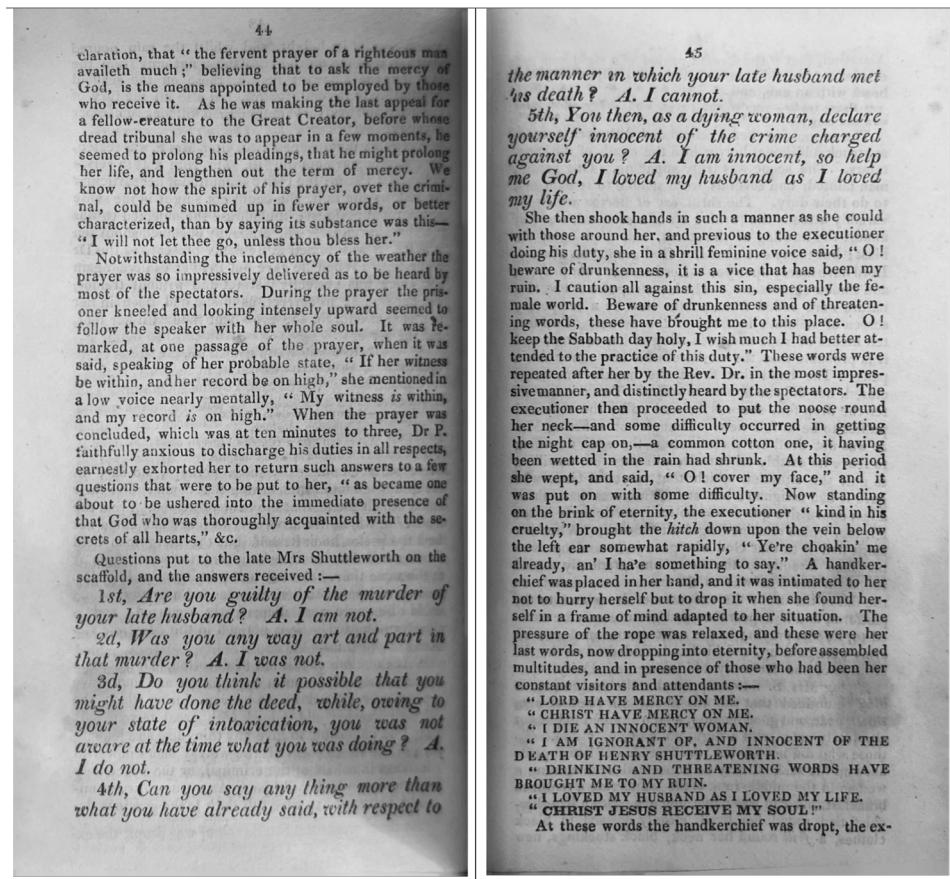


Figure 22. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 44-45.

A key typographic distinction appears in the final questioning scene of Shuttleworth at the scaffold, as published in the *Memoir* (see Figure 22).<sup>134</sup> This episode presents both the questions and Shuttleworth's steadfast denials in an italicised font, enlarged to three times the text size. This typography elevates such moments, granting them a visual prominence that mirrors their spiritual significance. The italicisation, often associated with direct speech or internal thought in literature, here seems to convey a deeper resonance, highlighting the intimate and sacred nature of her responses. Shuttleworth's invocation, 'I am innocent, so help me God', is not just a statement of innocence but a plea for divine witness. This emphasis is in line with Christian beliefs that view the

134. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 44-45.

final words of the dying as a testament to their soul's state and as a petition for divine mercy. The biblical verse, Luke 23:42-43, accounts for the tale of the penitent thief crucified alongside Jesus. In his final moments, he says to Jesus, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom', to which Jesus responds, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'. This exchange suggests that even a last-minute plea for mercy can lead to salvation. Similarly, John 1:9 states: 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. Confession, it seems, even at the end of life, can potentially lead to forgiveness. The questioning scene also anticipates and addresses a fundamental query likely to arise in the reader's mind about the role of Shuttleworth's intoxication in the crime and the possibility that she might have committed the act unknowingly, to which she answered 'no'. In Christian doctrine, personal accountability is upheld regardless of one's state of intoxication, as reflected in passages such as Ephesians 5:18, which warns against debauchery associated with drunkenness, and Galatians 5:21, which lists drunkenness among the acts that preclude inheriting the Kingdom of God.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, Proverbs 31:4-5 cautions rulers against drinking, lest it cloud their judgment and lead to injustice.<sup>136</sup> Against this backdrop, Shuttleworth's answer 'no' to the possibility of unknowingly committing the act while under the influence is significant. This editorial approach suggests a keen awareness of the reader's search for understanding amidst the conflicting evidence and the moral and spiritual ramifications of the case. The distinct typography serves as a visual cue, capturing the reader's attention and encouraging a deeper engagement with this pivotal moment.

The *Memoir* also makes use of visual text to convey the intensity of Shuttleworth's cries for mercy

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135. Ephesians 5:18: 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery'; and Galatians 5:21: 'envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God'.

136. 'It is not for kings, Lemuel—it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights'.

at the gallows. After responding to the questions and addressing the spectators, the executioner, at her request, covered her face and began to tighten the noose around her neck. It was then that Shuttleworth cried out, pleading for one more opportunity to speak to the onlookers. She cried:

'LORD HAVE MERCY ON ME.'  
 'CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME.'  
 'I DIE AN INNOCENT WOMAN.'  
 'I AM IGNORANT OF, AND INNOCENT OF THE DEATH OF HENRY SHUTTLEWORTH.'  
 'DRINKING AND THREATENING WORDS HAVE BROUGHT ME TO MY RUIN.'  
 'I LOVED MY HUSBAND AS I LOVED MY LIFE.'  
**'CHRIST JESUS RECEIVE MY SOUL!'**

At these words the handkerchief was dropt, the executioner, in readiness, cut the cord supporting the beam with an axe<sup>137</sup>

These capitalised declarations are steeped in the Christian tradition, with Shuttleworth's final utterances at the gallows echoing the rituals and beliefs central to her faith. Her pleas, 'LORD HAVE MERCY ON ME' and 'CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME', mirror the foundational plea for God's forgiveness in Christian liturgy. Her assertions of innocence, 'I DIE AN INNOCENT WOMAN' and 'I AM IGNORANT OF, AND INNOCENT OF THE DEATH OF HENRY SHUTTLEWORTH', echo the Christian tradition of martyrdom, where the endurance of suffering and unjust punishment is seen as a testament to righteousness. While she refuses to confess to murder, Shuttleworth's declarations repeat her earlier confession of her other sins, most notably: 'DRINKING AND THREATENING WORDS HAVE BROUGHT ME TO MY RUIN'. In her earlier address to the spectators, she had warned the audience against the dangers of alcohol, stating: 'O! beware of drunkenness, it is a vice that has been my ruin'.<sup>138</sup> The text also reveals that '[t]hese words were repeated after her by the Rev. Dr. in the most impressive manner, and distinctly heard

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137. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45-46.

138. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45.

by the spectators'.<sup>139</sup> In addition to the 'Old Ballad' on the cover of *The Trial*, which cautions against the ruinous effects of sin and drunkenness, the *Memoir* reinforces this moral framing through repetitions and capitalisation that stress Shuttleworth's confession of intemperance. This emphasis could be construed as adhering to the Christian practice of repentance, which seeks redemption through the confession of wrongdoing. However, this approach, paired with the ballads featured on *The Trial* cover page, invites readers to question the authenticity of her speech and the editor's intentions behind its inclusion. Muirhead explains that '[t]he churches' institutional dislike of alcoholic drink dates from the nineteenth century and gradually built up strength through the century. Drinking had been a notorious social problem, particularly in Scotland's cities for a long time'.<sup>140</sup> This inclusion potentially aims to guide readers toward a dual adherence to both the moral dictates of the church and the legal mandates of the time, blending spiritual admonitions with civic directives. It is a strategic narrative device to leverage the dramatic context of her execution to reinforce societal condemnation of a widespread vice rather than a straightforward testament to her character or a reflection of her remorse. This didactic stance mirrors the strategy employed in John Kerr's broadside, where his acceptance of punishment reveals the virtue of acknowledging one's misdeeds.

Both representations serve as moral reflections of their time, each reinforcing different aspects of societal and judicial expectations through the characters' final actions and words. From this perspective, alcohol consumption is not viewed as a mitigating factor or an excuse for Shuttleworth's alleged crime, as suggested by Trotter at the start of this chapter; rather, it is perceived as an additional causative factor contributing to her guilty verdict and fate. The societal

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139. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45.

140. Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity*, 99.

and ecclesiastical disdain towards drunkenness, especially during a period where alcohol consumption was stringently correlated with moral corruption and social decay, amplified Shuttleworth's culpability in the eyes of both the public and the legal adjudicators. Also, Shuttleworth's declaration of love for her husband, professed at the gallows despite being accused of his murder, conveys a complex convergence of devotion and Christian faith. Her assertion of innocence and simultaneous proclamation of devotion could be interpreted through the lens of Christian forgiveness and the sanctity of marriage, which Christianity holds inviolable. In Christian teachings, to love one's spouse faithfully reflects divine love. Even in the shadow of death, she makes a claim to moral integrity in line with Christian values. Her insistence on her innocence and her final appeal for Christian mercy is bolded, capitalised, and punctuated with an exclamation mark—**'CHRIST JESUS RECEIVE MY SOUL!'**—intensifying the emotional and spiritual urgency of her last words. She seeks ultimate judgment not from the flawed realm of human courts but from the divine court, believed to be infallible in discerning truth and administering justice. In this light, her final moments become an act of faith, a plea for divine vindication in the face of earthly condemnation. The dropping of the handkerchief and the executioner cutting the cord with an axe mark the solemn and irrevocable conclusion of the execution process—a powerful and tragic end to her life narrative.

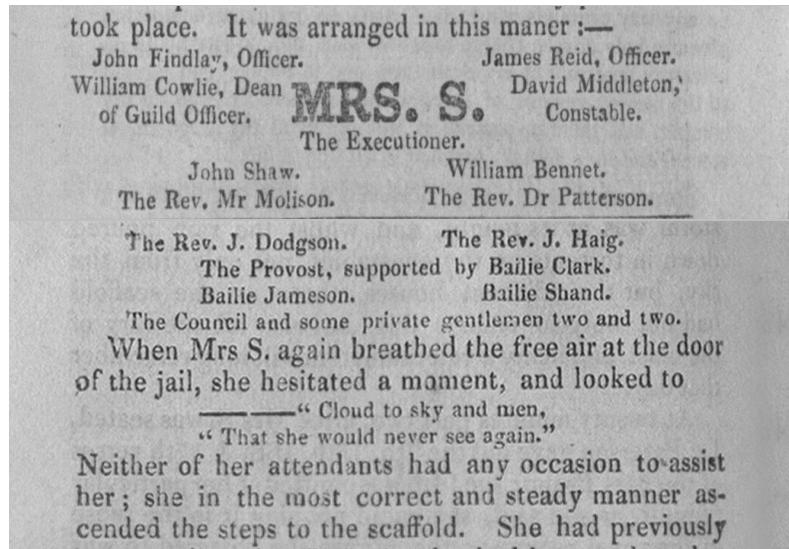


Figure 23. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 41-42.

Figure 23 shows how the *Memoir* also employs creative textual layouts to paint a vivid scene for its readers, as evidenced by the depiction of Shuttleworth's final walk from the prison to the scaffold.<sup>141</sup> This strategic arrangement of text serves to visually reinforce a narrative that intertwines her imminent earthly demise with the Christian implications of her eternal fate. At the forefront, two pairs of officers lead the way: their positions at the left and right hint at the inescapable grip of legal authority on her march towards finality. Behind her, the mention of four reverends, named in pairs, mirrors the Christian tradition of accompanying a soul to the edge of eternity, a practice also depicted in the ceremony of the Holy Sacrament. Their placement symbolises the church's role in preparing Shuttleworth for her transition from this life, underscoring the potential for spiritual salvation amid the solemnity of death. This subtle yet profound visual cue signals that while human justice is carried out, a more compassionate, divine oversight is at work, providing a modicum of solace and a reminder of redemption. At the procession's end, the Provost and bailies (judicial and administrative authority), followed by The Council and gentlemen, illustrate the collective witness of

141. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 41-42.

the community. Their presence in the layout bolsters the societal structures bearing witness to the execution, indicating a shared civic responsibility in the solemn act unfolding. Through its deliberate design, the *Memoir* not only details the event but also invokes a tableau of visual symbolism, inviting readers to contemplate the intersecting forces of law, morality, and spirituality that envelop Shuttleworth in her final moments.

### 2.3.2 Verbal/Textual Representations

After considering the visual treatment of Christian tradition and lore, I now probe in greater detail the textual portrayals. Within *The Trial* chapbook, the prominent placement of the Lord Justice Clerk's speech after the Jury returned their verdict and the fact that this speech has one of the few added sentences to the second edition signals its importance in the narrative. This elevation signals the influence of Christian morality in shaping the narrative, reflecting the period's societal norms and the judiciary's role as a moral guide. In his statement, he affirmed:

Murder, more especially by the wife upon her husband, is alike forbidden by the laws of God and man; "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed". [...] With regards to mercy in this world being extended to you, the circumstances of your case forbid any hope of it; therefore, "lay not the flattering unction to thy soul".<sup>142</sup>

The interplay of 'lay not the flattering unction to thy soul' with the powerful edict from Genesis 9:6, 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed', intertwines different streams of Christian thought, painting a complex theological canvas reflective of Scotland's religious milieu. The phrase 'more especially' emphasises the seriousness of this type of murder, while the repeated invocation of Genesis 9:6—"Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed"—on the cover page and within the text—frames the chapbook within a rhetoric of divine justice as well as imbuing the narrative with a sense of moral inevitability. This inclusion suggests that the publisher's

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142. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, 2nd ed. (1821), 24.

decision to place it on the cover may have been intended as a thematic echo of the chapbook's contents, possibly to bolster or amplify the weighty message conveyed in the reported speech. This tactic reinforces the gravity of the crime and the certainty of retribution, both human and divine. The utilisation of this biblical verse as a basis for judgment reveals a clear and unequivocal message of retribution found in the Old Testament, potentially aligning with the principles of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, which proclaims the sovereignty of God and stringent adherence to scriptural authority, making it distinct from Evangelicalism. The Biblical verse 9:6 also resonates in the *Memoir*, particularly in 'The Death Warrant'. The warrant indicated that the verdict in the Shuttleworth case adhered to the stipulations of the '1751 Murder Act', which states: 'it enacted by the King's most excellent majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal and commons in this present parliament assembled and by the authority of the same'.<sup>143</sup> Notably, this phrasing stresses the monarch's esteemed position in the law-making process but also highlights that the King is not acting unilaterally. This phrase captures the interplay of monarchy, religion, nobility, and the general citizenry in the legislative framework, with a particular emphasis on the influence of religious leadership. Significantly, the mention of the 'lords spiritual' foregrounds the integral role religion played in governance, as these figures represent the upper echelons of the church.

On the other hand, the use of Shakespeare's famous line, 'Lay not the flattering unction to thy soul', delivers a different message. '[U]nction' here refers to a soothing or comforting balm, and the term warns against using such words or thoughts to deceive oneself. In Shuttleworth's case, the phrase takes on a more specific and cautionary meaning since she adamantly refused to admit her guilt till the end. The lexis implies that Shuttleworth should not try to find comfort or excuses for her deeds, as the severity of her actions cannot be absolved or downplayed. It carries a tone of

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143. '1751: 25 George 2 C.37: The Murder Act'.

moral accountability—the individual should confront the gravity of their actions without resorting to self-deception. The Lord Justice Clerk is urging Shuttleworth to admit her guilt and repent to avoid eternal and fiery damnation. It is discernible that while this idiom resonates with a broad spectrum of Christian denominations due to its universal admonition against moral complacency, it especially chimes with the nuances of Evangelicalism. John R. McIntosh states that '[r]epentance: in evangelical theology, [is] not just sorrow for sin but the moral act of turning of the whole person in mind and will to agree with and to obey the will of God'.<sup>144</sup> So repentance involves both the confession of sins, which is acknowledging one's wrongdoing before God, and the acceptance of punishment, which involves submission to the consequences as a sincere act of contrition and a commitment to divine will. This process signifies a transformative realignment with God's moral standards. The incorporation of biblical verses alongside Shakespearean phrases is not merely stylistic then; it strategically anchors the narrative in the widely recognised moral frameworks of the period. This conscious synthesis of legal rhetoric and theological imagery in the chapbook serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it underpins the prevailing Christian ethos, effectively endorsing societal norms. Secondly, it engages readers by grounding the account of Shuttleworth's transgression in familiar cultural touchstones, thereby maximising the narrative's didactic impact. The addition to the Lord Justice Clerk's speech in the second edition of *The Trial* supports the prevailing Christian ethos. By embedding legal authority within a moral framework, *The Trial* becomes a potent vehicle for expressing and affirming the ethical standards of its time.

Although both 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed' and 'Thou shalt not kill' appear on the cover of *The Trial*, they accentuate a thematic dichotomy. However, it is only within the *Memoir* that the spirit of the latter verse is fully explored, as it resonates through the two

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144. John R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740–1800*, Scottish Historical Review Monograph Series, no. 5 (East Linton, East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 11.

petitions that plead for mercy over retribution. Even though both petitions were ultimately dismissed, culminating in Shuttleworth's execution, the Christian resonances of the case are undeniable. The initial petition, endorsed by two hundred 'inhabitants of the Royal Burgh of Montrose', pleaded for mercy. The transcript signifies those petitioners believed that the verdict was 'pronounced in error, and proceeded entirely upon circumstantial evidence. Your Petitioner humbly begs leave to assure your Majesty that she is perfectly innocent of the crime of which she has been found guilty'.<sup>145</sup> This representation of the communal effort in drafting and submitting the petition reflects a concerted civic response. Bebbington argues that 'evangelicals were committed to a negative policy of reform. Their proposal was regularly for the elimination of what was wrong'.<sup>146</sup> In this scenario, evangelicals saw the act of petitioning against the verdict as a moral imperative to confront and abolish a perceived injustice. The commitment to eliminating what is considered immoral, in this case, a wrongful conviction based on circumstantial evidence, aligns with their reformist, socially-conscious agenda. Therefore, the petition serves not only as a legal appeal but also operates within a moral framework that evangelicals often used to navigate societal challenges.

Another example that vividly depicts the interplay of legal and religious dictates is the portrayal of the Holy Sacrament in the *Memoir*, emphasising the act of confession as a necessary rite. The chapbook mentions that Rev. J. Dodgson attended to Shuttleworth twice to prepare her for the Holy Sacrament, which was to be administered on the day of her execution:

Immediately previous to administering the Holy Sacrament, the Rev. Clergyman adjured her in the most solemn manner, as she was about appearing before ALMIGHTY GOD, preparatory to her partaking of the Sacred Emblems of the body and blood of her Saviour, that she would confess to him the whole truth, as she must be very conscious what an addition it would be to her guilt, if at that time she could dare to assert a falsehood.<sup>147</sup>

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145. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 18.

146. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 135.

147. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 36.

While the *Memoir* portrays the private exchange between Shuttleworth and the clergyman during the administration of the Holy Sacrament, it also documents her reply:

'Indeed, Sir, I am perfectly conscious of what an aggravation it would be to the crime, if I had committed it, and now at this moment would deny it; but I solemnly declare I am innocent of the crime laid to my charge, SO HELP ME GOD,' no which she received the Holy Sacrament in the most pious and devout manner.

This extract relies on dramatic narrative strategies to theatricalise and intensify the encounter, moving from the solemnity of the sacrament to Shuttleworth's unwavering declaration of innocence. Unlike the broadsides, which merely note that the Holy Sacrament was performed, the *Memoir* provides a more detailed account.<sup>148</sup> It describes Shuttleworth's devout reception of the sacrament, portraying her as a figure of piety and religious adherence. Her request to exclude the verse about 'blood guiltiness' from 'Psalm 51' could be seen as embodying a complex relationship with Christian tradition.<sup>149</sup> On the one hand, her choice suggests a refusal to falsely admit guilt in keeping with her consistent claims of innocence, implying a personal conviction and a careful selection of scripture that aligns with her narrative. On the other hand, her action points to a deep reverence for the Psalm's sanctity, avoiding recitation of a verse that she believes does not reflect her moral state.

Both interpretations share a fundamental recognition of the gravity of the Psalm in Christian tradition. Whether Shuttleworth's request is viewed as her rejection of an unjust label of guilt or as an index of her veneration for the Psalm, both perspectives assume that she ascribes spiritual weight to the act of recitation. This depiction strategically positions her as a sympathetic character, potentially in stark contrast to the crime for which she has been condemned. By emphasising her pious behaviour, the narrative prompts us to question the justice of her execution—her spiritual

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148. 'Execution: A Full, True and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret', broadside (1821); 'An Account of the last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

149. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 43.

comportment may be at odds with the image of a murderer. The chapbook's approach not only provides a richer context but also subtly challenges readers to consider the complexities of moral judgment and reconcile the depicted religious virtue with the secular verdict of guilt.

Like the chapbooks, the pervasive influence of Christianity surfaces strikingly in the broadside titled 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth'.<sup>150</sup> This broadside stresses the spiritual dimensions of Shuttleworth's execution day. In addition to the religious observances—the sacrament ritual, the communal singing of the 51st Psalm, and Shuttleworth's final appeal, 'Jesus Christ have mercy on [her] soul'—her public declaration of innocence is an impassioned spiritual plea, crafting a scene where earthly judgment intersects with a call for divine mercy. The broadside extends the role of religious figures Rev. Mr. Dodgson and Dr. Paterson beyond spiritual consolation; they are integral participants in the civil procedure of execution. Rev. Mr. Dodgson's administering of the sacrament to Shuttleworth, followed by his presence at her execution, may be seen as a form of ecclesiastical legitimisation of the legal proceedings. Likewise, the involvement of Provost Gibson and Rev. Dr. Paterson in delivering the official denial of clemency marks them as conduits for the civil authority's decision. In this depicted execution scene, the role of religion is not only highlighted but also magnified and centralised, blurring the lines between spiritual ritual and judicial process.

On the other hand, the press diverges significantly from street literature in its treatment of Margaret Shuttleworth's case, adopting a more secular tone. Its coverage notably omits explicit religious references or citations—a sharp contrast to the spiritually charged portrayals found in chapbooks and broadsides.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, the underlying influence of Christian moral traditions

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150. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

151. 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 October 1821; 'At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth', *Observer of the Times*, 30 September 1821; 'Edinburgh, November 3rd', *Glasgow Herald*, 5

remains evident. The press's framing of execution as a just and necessary outcome subtly reflects a moral logic rooted in Christian—particularly Old Testament—conceptions of retributive justice, which underpinned both Protestant and Catholic thought in early nineteenth-century Scotland. Thus, even without overt scriptural framing, the press affirms a broader moral order.

Examining the portrayal of Christian traditions in the visual and verbal articulations of the Shuttleworth case reveals both the pervasive reach and the internal contradictions of Christian ideologies. These depictions illustrate how Christianity operates not only as a spiritual framework and source of comfort but also as an instrument for regulating behaviour and legitimising state authority. The following section continues to probe the same cluster of street literature depictions, but shifts focus from religious and gendered framings to their engagement with medical jurisprudence. This empirical discourse introduces a different kind of authority—one rooted in science rather than morality—offering an alternative lens through which to reassess Shuttleworth's case.

#### 2.4 Dissection as Medical Jurisprudence and Punishment

By the late eighteenth century, Scotland had firmly established itself as a central nexus for the development of medical jurisprudence, serving as the conduit for its dissemination from Europe to the broader British territories.<sup>152</sup> What makes the 1821 Margaret Shuttleworth case stand out is the dual application of medical dissection, not only as a method of exacting punishment on the

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November 1821; 'Perth Assizes', *Inverness Courier*, 27 September 1821; 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821; 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter*, 6 October 1821.

152. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse*, 179. Further discussion on the topic can be found in Brenda White, 'Training Medical Policemen: Forensic Medicine and Public Health in Nineteenth-Century Scotland', in *Legal Medicine in History*, ed. Michael Clark and Catherine Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145. White corroborates Bennett's assertion: 'Medical Jurisprudence and medical police, considered as bodies of knowledge, were introduced into Britain from Europe via Scotland in the closing decades of the eighteenth century'.

perpetrator but also as a tool to unravel the circumstances surrounding Henry Shuttleworth's death.

This section scrutinises the portrayal of these two applications in Shuttleworth's case in street literature and the popular press, tracing the evolving narrative roles that medical practices played in shaping public perception and legal discourse, thereby reflecting the shifting boundaries between punitive measures and the pursuit of empirical truth in the early nineteenth century.

Contemporary surgeons, John Ayrton Paris and John Samuel Martin Fonblanque, in the second volume of their *Medical Jurisprudence* (1823), argue that medical jurisprudence 'aid[s] the administration of justice in cases of homicide'.<sup>153</sup> They explain that 'it is first necessary that the medical practitioner should determine by examination, inspection, or dissection, whether the matter ought to be referred to the criminal tribunals, or whether the decease of the party is to be attributed to any of those natural causes, which are generally classed as "Death by the Visitation of God"'.<sup>154</sup>

Theodoric Romeyn Beck, in *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence* (1829), elaborates the purpose of medical interference in the legal realm as follows:

In many instances, the evidence of medical men is required. Sometimes, indeed, the facts are so clear, that no professional opinion can be wanted; but whenever there is the least uncertainty, such opinions should be taken, and for the most part a dissection must be made. The importance of medical testimony in the cases now under consideration will readily be appreciated. It may, and indeed frequently does, decide on the life of an individual; and some preliminary cautions respecting the conduct of the physician or surgeon, may hence, with propriety, be introduced in this place.<sup>155</sup>

Thus, in a case like Shuttleworth's, where a vortex of dissonant voices exists, the involvement of medical professionals would be crucial. *The Trial* chapbook indicates that Mr Maconochie (the

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153. John Ayrton Paris and John Samuel Martin Fonblanque, *Medical Jurisprudence*, vol. 2 (London: W. Phillips; T. & G. Underwood; S. Highley; and W. & C. Tait, Edinburgh, 1823), 1.

154. Paris and Fonblanque, *Medical Jurisprudence*, 1.

155. Theodoric Romeyn Beck, *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence*, 3rd ed. (London: J. Moves et al.; Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1829), 263.

prosecutor for the crown) addressed the Jury:

He reminded the Jury that they would not be justified in returning a verdict against the prisoner, unless distinctly-proved by the evidence brought before them; he called their attention to the particular circumstances as to the position of the body when found by persons who were called in to examine it. They had the evidence of the medical men, which went distinctly to show that the injuries could not have been received by a fall down stairs, but on the contrary had been inflicted with a heavy blunt instrument, and that they could say no less than three distinct blows had been inflicted upon this man, by some person or other.<sup>156</sup>

Mr Maconochie's speech emphasises the paramount importance of evidence-based judgment in Shuttleworth's case. Any verdict, he argues, must be substantiated by unequivocal evidence. Moreover, he highlights the significance of medical testimony in illustrating the nature of the deceased's injuries. He points to specific data that disproves an accidental fall and suggests instead a violent attack via a blunt instrument, thereby providing a basis upon which the jury can evaluate the credibility of the prosecution's claim. This instance marks an early recognition of the vital role medical insight plays in uncovering the truth.

However, a close examination of the doctors' testimony introduces further complexity. Although their findings are not challenged and their efforts are recognised, their statements are presented alongside anecdotal witness accounts, treated less as definitive medical evidence and more as just one perspective among many in both *The Trial* and the press. In *The Trial*, the medical testimony plays a significant, albeit seemingly marginalised, role in determining the outcome of the case. For example, the dissection report by Drs. Gibson, Hoile, and Crabb establishes the cause of death as murder, attributing it to three severe blows to the head, which inflicted major damage and induced internal bleeding, conclusively ruling out the possibility of death by falling downstairs.<sup>157</sup> Also, Dr Hoile's testimony of his visit to the Shuttleworth house after being summoned and his reading of

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156. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 19.

157. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 16-17.

the surgeons' report earned recognition and appreciation from the court, indicating the depth and precision of the medical observations made. The Lordship complimented Dr Hoile 'for the accuracy and distinctness with which his evidence was given'.<sup>158</sup> However, despite the weight and ramifications of such medical evidence, the arrangement of testimonies within *The Trial* diminishes its perceived importance. In the primary text, the medical testimonies nestle between the character statements of Mary Thorn, a neighbour, and Mr. Robert Burnes, an acquaintance of the deceased, undermining their scientific weight.

In contrast, the 'Certificate of the Surgeons' published in the same chapbook *The Trial*, is given prominence through uppercase subheadings and the annotation '(copy)', which conveys a sense of formality and suggests it is an official and accurate reproduction.<sup>159</sup> This emphasis contradicts the text's earlier aversion to the doctors' medical testimonies, hinting at tensions and inconsistencies in the perceived value and reliability of such evidential contributions to the trial's discourse. This hazy status of medical jurisprudence is mirrored in the narrative detailing Dr Hoile's initial unwillingness to attend the crime scene, as *The Trial* chapbook notes, 'Dr Hoile- deponed that he was called to visit the late Henry Shuttleworth but was reluctant to go'.<sup>160</sup> While this hesitation could symbolise broader challenges and apprehensions within the field of medical jurisprudence at the time, it may also signify a more visceral distaste for the grim task of dissecting a head, a detail from which the chapbook does not shy away. By illustrating a medical professional's reluctance to participate in such a morbid scene, *The Trial* heightens fascination with the grotesque. It prompts speculation about the nature of forensic medicine and the roles of its practitioners in such investigations.

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158. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 16.

159. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 16.

160. *Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), 14.

A similar drive to marginalise medical testimony is evident in several newspaper articles, including ‘Circuit Court of Justiciary’, in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, and ‘Summer Assizes’, in the *General Evening Post*.<sup>161</sup> These articles analogously interweave the doctors’ testimonies among those of other witnesses. Moreover, ‘At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth’ from the *Observer of the Times* opens with a quote clearly drawn from the surgeon’s report on the victim’s body, but notably omits identifying the source as medical, thereby diminishing the weight of professional expertise.<sup>162</sup> The articles also mentioned that an objection was raised by Shuttleworth’s Chancellor, questioning ‘the relevancy of the indictment’, but was overruled by the court. This deliberate omission, coupled with the Chancellor’s objection, seems to reflect a prevalent distrust and devaluation of the reliability of medical jurisprudence at the time. It suggests a relegation of medical testimony to hearsay status in representations of the Shuttleworth case, which provides a sobering commentary on the era’s ambivalence toward the burgeoning scientific discipline. This literary depiction reflects a reluctance to accept scientific methods over traditional, anecdotal evidence in legal matters. It underscores a pivotal tension within the socio-legal discourse, reflecting the period’s struggle to reconcile empirical facts with established legal practices. This tension is apparent in White’s claims that in Scotland, ‘until the 1830s it was not usual for police surgeons appearing in the higher courts to hold academic appointments, as medical evidence was not highly regarded’.<sup>163</sup> Moving forward, it becomes imperative to explore how this complex portrayal extends to the representation of dissection, considering it as a form of punishment, and how it integrates with the broader narrative constructs and societal perceptions of the period. Richardson asserts that according to the medical

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161. ‘At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth’, *Observer of the Times*, 30 September 1821; ‘Summer Assizes’, *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821.

162. ‘At the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Perth’, *Observer of the Times*, 30 September 1821.

163. White, ‘Training Medical Policemen’, 154.

practitioners, the study of anatomy by dissection was ‘the basis for surgery’ and a ‘necessary inhumanity’ to advance medicine.<sup>164</sup> While many in the medical community saw dissection as crucial to medical discovery, for the wider community, being dissected after death amounted to a further, appalling violation of individual dignity.

While dissection was often viewed as a fate more dreaded than execution itself, it is intriguing to delve into Shuttleworth’s perspective on the matter. In her final speech before execution, as depicted in the *Memoir*, she declared, ‘I am not fley’d [afraid] at the manner of my death – I feel only a concern about the state of my soul’.<sup>165</sup> This utterance taps into the fears delineated by Richardson’s analysis of the Church’s confusion regarding the soul’s fate, which ‘was reflected at a popular level’.<sup>166</sup>

If the soul left the body at death and migrated to its heavenly resting place, there would exist the danger that, disembodied, it could remain hovering around the haunts of the living. If on the other hand, it slept in the grave then it would somehow be present in or near the body after death. In either case, awareness of the corpse’s uncertain metaphysical nature could relate to a belief that an individual’s ‘nonmaterial component’ could retain its attachment to the body for an unspecified period after death.<sup>167</sup>

In this context, Shuttleworth harbours nagging fears about what will happen to her body and soul after death; dissection was not only a physical defilement but also had profound spiritual consequences. At the time, many believed, as Richardson argues, that the body’s integrity postmortem was essential for resurrection at the end of days, a common doctrine in Christian eschatology. Thus, dissection could be seen as a desecration that might jeopardise one’s prospects of eternal peace. Shuttleworth’s dread, as described, is multifaceted. It is not only the fear that her body

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164. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 30-31.

165. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 41.

166. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 15.

167. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 16.

will be dissected and displayed as an object of scientific curiosity, but also the terror of potentially losing her soul's serenity in the afterlife. This fear reflects the intersection of religious beliefs with the practices of capital punishment and postmortem treatment of the body, which were often intertwined with messages about morality, correct behaviour and public order. Public executions and subsequent dissections in cases of murder were considered an aggravation according to the 1751 Murder Act for the better prevention of crime, serving as a deterrent. The underlying message was unequivocal: the fate that befell Shuttleworth could overtake anyone who strayed from the accepted path. Her treatment in death, whether her body would be respected or dissected, served as a posthumous statement of her social standing and the severity of her alleged crimes. The gesture of giving Shuttleworth a 'handkerchief' at the gallows,<sup>168</sup> could be construed as a superficial attempt by authorities to provide her with a semblance of autonomy at her death. However, this gesture hardly compensates for the hopelessness of her situation. It serves as a stark reminder of the control exercised over her body and fate, even in her final moments. The handkerchief, rather than empowering her, may instead highlight the performative aspects of her execution, designed to convey a sense of procedural justice and mercy in a situation where neither was truly afforded to her. The handkerchief ritual, in essence, mirrors the intricate interplay of compassion and control, spiritual concern, and societal display of power over life and death.

On the other hand, while the two broadsides have different tones and ideations, they both state in identical phrasing and placement that 'she spoke without any agitation concerning her unhappy situation and the dissection of her body'.<sup>169</sup> This observation accentuates a shared narrative element that persists through varying emotional and ideological lenses, which is a significant point in a

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168. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45.

169. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821); 'Execution: A Full, True, and Particular Account of the Execution of Mrs. Margaret', broadside (1821).

discussion about the portrayal and perception of her character in the broadsides. It focuses attention on the consistency of specific facts amidst the broader interpretative differences, which could be pivotal in understanding how the event was historically recorded and perceived. The portrayal of Shuttleworth's composure in the face of dissection, as rendered in the two broadsides, can be critically unpacked to reveal several layers of narrative intention and cultural sentiment. Firstly, the depiction of her as seemingly unruffled aligns her with a melodramatic archetype: the stoic martyr who faces her fate with unwavering calmness. Secondly, this narrative strategy steers readers away from empathising with the visceral dread that dissection typically provokes, linking her response more with idealised virtue than human vulnerability. Thirdly, the broadsides may be deliberately downplaying the event to maintain a degree of public decency, specifically at a time when public dissections were a source of morbid condemnation. Or it could suggest a deliberate editorial ploy to balance the readers' appetite for the macabre with a certain level of decorum while still engaging with a topic that would have been inherently provocative to contemporary audiences. Lastly, this portrayal raises questions about the condemned woman's agency, and whether it obfuscates any authentic emotional turmoil Shuttleworth might have experienced. By asserting her lack of agitation, the broadsides could be seen as silencing her voice by denying her the space to express fear or objections to the violation of her body postmortem. The broadsides, thus, potentially strip Shuttleworth of her autonomy at her most vulnerable moment, shaping her legacy within a framework of passivity and acceptance that may not accurately reflect her true sentiments. Through these lenses, the broadsides' depiction of Shuttleworth reveals a complex interplay of narrative design and cultural mores, signalling a contradictory impulse toward both sensationalism and sensitivity.

Turning our attention from the broadsides to the press accounts, we observe a distinctive narrative approach. While the broadsides paint Shuttleworth as composed and untroubled by the

prospect of dissection, the press, though noting it as part of her sentence, remains notably silent on her reaction to this element of her fate.<sup>170</sup> The editorial decision to omit Shuttleworth's apprehension towards the dissection in the press coverage is telling, indicative of a controlled narrative strategy. By selectively crafting the story to exclude her subjective experience, the press not only dictates the terms of her portrayal but also shapes public discourse on the matter. This editorial policy simplifies the complex reality of her execution, presenting instead a sanitised version of events that sidesteps the ethical quagmire associated with postmortem dissections for medical research. In this light, the press's narrative is designed to inform without inciting controversy or challenging prevailing moral sentiments. It amounts to a deliberate avoidance of the potential for Shuttleworth's narrative to awaken sympathy or ignite debate over the punitive nature of dissection and its role in the advancement of medical science. By circumventing these aspects, the press maintains a streamlined story that upholds a semblance of decorum and aligns with societal expectations while quietly diminishing the full extent of Shuttleworth's agency and the contentious implications of her body's use in medical exploration.

The public display of dissection transforms the act from scientific exploration to a societal spectacle, where degradation and violation of the condemned are laid bare. For Richardson, Part of the punishment, indeed, was the very publicity involved in the delivery from hangman to surgeons at the gallows, and later in the public exhibition of the opened body itself. Dissection was added to the array of punishments available to the bench, and rendered public by royal desire, so that the punishment inflicted upon the body of the murderer should publicly be seen to transcend that already inflicted on the scaffold.<sup>171</sup>

At the time, the public spectacle aimed to demonstrate the severity of the punishment and reinforce

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170. See 'Circuit Court of Justiciary', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 October 1821; 'Perth Assizes', *Inverness Courier*, 27 September 1821; 'Summer Assizes', *General Evening Post*, 27 September 1821; 'Summer Assizes', *Saunders's News-Letter*, 6 October 1821.

171. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 32, 34.

the concept of retributive justice. In this respect, '[t]he surgeon-anatomist thereby became an executioner of the law'.<sup>172</sup> Sarah Tarlow claims that the judicial sanctions enacted on the criminal body by dissection 'assaults the privacy and decency of the corpse'.<sup>173</sup> According to this public belief, the body after death is not merely a vacant shell but retains a symbolic or real link with the essence or spirit of the person who has died. Bennett states that such beliefs led to 'difficulties faced by the medical profession in obtaining cadavers' fuelling 'the problem of body-snatching, which reached its pinnacle in the early nineteenth century'.<sup>174</sup> Such communal rejection is depicted in Shuttleworth's case: the *Memoir* dedicates a page and a half to an account of the elaborate security precautions taken while transferring her body for dissection in Edinburgh. Shuttleworth's after-death journey to dissection is carefully detailed from 'the package [being] brought from the prison and put on a cart, covered by the canvas used at the execution' to its concealed progression, 'the box was fictitiously addressed', to the way it 'was accompanied by a town officer and the proprietor of the cart, and escorted by six of the militia several miles on the way'.<sup>175</sup> The officer and militia escort hints at an apprehension of public backlash or interference. Moreover, the effort made to inform the boatmen about the nature of their cargo, combined with the special arrangement of paying 'an extra fare of one shilling' for its delivery, emphasises the authorities' grasp of the possibilities of community retaliations or corpse theft.<sup>176</sup> Such practices are also documented by Bennett, where she notes instances of 'executed criminal bodies being handed over to sailors to be disposed of at sea to

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172. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 34.

173. Sarah Tarlow, *Ritual, Belief, and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145

174. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse*, 159.

175. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 48.

176. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 48.

prevent their falling into the hands of the surgeons'.<sup>177</sup> The *Memoir* also intentionally withholds details of the dissection, assuring readers that they 'will not be disgusted with the horrid details' of the medical procedure.<sup>178</sup> These editorial choices, along with covert manoeuvres to conceal Shuttleworth's corpse and ensure its safe delivery for dissection, underscore a striking dissonance between the theatricality of state execution and the logistical caution surrounding its aftermath.

This shifting trajectory—from the public spectacle of execution to the private concealment of the corpse—is complicated by the stipulation that the dissection itself be 'publicly [...] anatomised'.<sup>179</sup> These clashing attitudes extend not just to the authorities but also to the surgeons directly involved. The surgeon's choice to refrain from elaborating on the 'horrid details' acknowledges collective sensitivities while also serving as a sensational ruse that draws the audience deeper into the narrative through what is left unsaid. The surgeon, as a literary construct, becomes a vehicle for both reflecting societal norms and manipulating reader response, leveraging the allure of the unspoken to heighten the story's grip on the imagination. However, this concealment of the dissection details contrasts with the description of Shuttleworth's post-mortem appearance. The statement that, '[n]otwithstanding the violence of the shock which the great fall occasioned, Mrs S's neck was not dislocated, nor did her face exhibit those livid or apoplectic appearances which those who die by suspension usually exhibit',<sup>180</sup> coupled with '[s]he had bled from the left ear, which will account for this; it was unnoticed on the gibbet, as the blood ran down the neck and went below her clothes',<sup>181</sup>

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177. Bennet, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse*, 162.

178. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 48.

179. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 15.

180. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 47.

181. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 47.

reveals a deep-rooted curiosity about the physiological reactions to death by hanging. It underscores the intensity with which such executions were observed and later recounted.

The specific attention to the trajectory of blood and its reasons signals a fascination that extends beyond the spectacle, delving into the anatomical and medical intricacies of the act. The *Memoir* mirrors a medical dissection to engage the audience with the scientifically gruesome features of the scene. The level of corporeal detail provided in the *Memoir* evokes the ‘tales of terror’ found in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, particularly the 1827 execution tale ‘Le Revenant’, which includes a first-person narration of surviving a hanging, complete with a sensory account of how it feels to be hanged.<sup>182</sup> Heather Worthington contends that ‘the more direct realism of *Blackwood’s* terror fiction seems to be derived partly from the sensational “true crime” narrative often found in broadsheet, chapbook, and newspaper publications’.<sup>183</sup> She continues that the ‘spectacle of execution here is not a statement of sovereign power, disseminated in prose to reinforce its effect. [. . .] it is rather an exercise in sensationalism’.<sup>184</sup> In this context, the *Memoir* forms a paradoxical narrative in which the macabre spectacle of the condemned criminal’s body is simultaneously presented to and withheld from the public gaze, signalling a complex entanglement of fascination and repulsion, transparency and concealment, within the prevailing cultural and scientific discourse.

In stark contrast to the filtered depictions of Shuttleworth’s dissection, the theatrics surrounding her execution are painted in extravagant, melodramatic hues. For Bennett,

[i]n eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland, the theatre of the gallows involved numerous actors, from the authorities responsible for carrying out the death sentence including the sheriffs, magistrates and executioners, to the condemned criminals themselves and the vast

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182. Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 39, accessed 5 February 2025, <https://go.exlibris.link/t64BT8l0>.

183. Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective*, 30-31.

184. Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective*, 36.

number of people who attended to see the spectacle unfold.<sup>185</sup>

Bennett's figurations accentuate the early nineteenth-century Scottish gallows both as a site of execution as well as a 'stage' where an elaborate and grisly ritual of 'endings' unfolds for an eager audience. In this grotesque pageant, every 'performer', every eye, and every hushed or fervent whisper coalesced to magnify the ostentatious 'act'—a melodramatic demonstration of the dire consequences that befell those who dared defy the rule of law. The execution, with its exaggerated staging and emotive interplays, stood in marked disparity to the subdued dissection, emphasising the polar approaches Scottish society adopted in navigating the dichotomies of public punishment and scientific inquiry.

Shuttleworth's execution, as recounted in the *Memoir*, blurs the boundary between punishment and performance. Both she and the audience become participants in a theatrical spectacle shaped by emotion, morality, and introspection. The *Memoir* starts by alerting us to the 'juvenile spectators' who 'had taken their stations'—an audience impatiently waiting for an 'entertainment' to begin.<sup>186</sup> The scene is 'awfully picturesque and affecting' and suitable 'as a very imposing study for the pencil of Fuseli'.<sup>187</sup> In keeping with this melo/dramatic tone, Shuttleworth's entrance is rendered in strikingly visual terms: she 'appeared before the assembled multitude calm and collected'.<sup>188</sup> This poised portrayal can be measured against her later emotional proclamations of innocence when she cries: 'I am not', 'I was not', and most poignantly, 'I am innocent, so help me God, I loved my

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185. Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse*, 125.

186. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 38.

187. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 42.

188. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 42.

husband as I loved my life'.<sup>189</sup> This contrast highlights the complexity of her emotional state and the performative expectations embedded within execution narratives. Her declarations of innocence are not the only emotionally charged moment; the act of 'many [spectators] present' joining Shuttleworth in singing the 'Psalm' for 'about ten minutes' transforms the execution from a mere punitive act to a collective, shared experience.<sup>190</sup> This facet of communal engagement humanises the event, evoking a sense of solidarity even in the grimmest circumstances. In addition, her deeply reflective plea, 'O! beware of drunkenness', positions Shuttleworth not merely as a condemned woman but as a moral beacon, counselling the audience against vice.<sup>191</sup> The visceral reactions of the crowd at the point when Shuttleworth falls to her death intensify the macabre spectacle. The *Memoir* notes:

The supporting beam rebounded with such a crash as struck additional horror into the minds of the spectators. The scene was truly appalling. One gentleman fainted, and several were unable to remain and to do their duty. The shrill cry of horror which invariably attends the turning off of a criminal, was lost amidst the howling of the storm, and died upon the blast.<sup>192</sup>

This passage reinforces the theatrical dimensions of the 'act'. The crashing beam acts as a dramatic auditory cue, akin to a staged climax or crescendo, enhanced by the physical responses of the crowd—fainting, fleeing and recoiling. The phrase 'the shrill cry of horror which invariably attends' implies a ritualised script, highlighting how such moments had become codified components of public executions. Amidst the dramatic 'scene', the crowd once again show moral support with pleas and prayers: 'God grant you grace' and 'Lord have mercy upon you'.<sup>193</sup> In crafting the narrative of

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189. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 44-45.

190. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 43.

191. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 45.

192. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 46.

193. *Memoir, &c. of Mrs. Shuttleworth* (1821), 46.

Margaret Shuttleworth's execution, the text renders a tableau that stirs a profound human connection and empathy, even against the stark backdrop of capital punishment. The juxtaposition of the act's brutality with a spontaneous surge of communal compassion brings to light the societal conflict over the death penalty—a complex emotional conflict that intertwines public sentiment with ethical and philosophical questions regarding justice, state-sanctioned execution, and redemption. The convergence of these conflicting feelings and ethical quandaries is reflected in this scene. Such tension is compounded by the decision to publish the *Memoir* only after Shuttleworth's execution, as recorded in the disclaimers of both editions of *The Trial*. Such timing suggests a calculated effort to commodify the spectacle of her death, framing the narrative as a cultural product that capitalises on personal tragedy for commercial gain.<sup>194</sup>

Similarly, the broadside 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth' begins with a melodramatic flourish, heralding Margaret Shuttleworth's execution as 'a spectacle never before witnessed in this place', imbuing the event with tragic grandeur.<sup>195</sup> Shuttleworth is given the poise and dignity of a classical tragic heroine; she was 'neatly dressed in black, with a white apron', her attire symbolising both her sombre fate and inherent nobility, as the narrative 'sets the stage' for her final act of moral discourse. Shuttleworth's last moments before the 'appalling apparatus of death' and her warning about the vices that led her to the gallows, delivered in 'a strong and audible voice', serve as a moralising soliloquy. Evocative phrasing throughout this account—'unfortunate woman', 'horrible exhibition'—raises the emotional stakes, inviting comparison with melodrama's heightened rhetorical repertoire. In addition, the crowd's collective recitation of the 51st Psalm, along with Shuttleworth, blurs the lines between 'spectators' and

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194. *The Trial of Margaret Tindal*, both editions (1821), disclaimer page.

195. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

'participants' in a shared affective experience. The narrative extends past the moment of execution, culminating in the detail that her body was 'put into a box, to be sent to Edinburgh for dissection'. This 'finale', macabre and voyeuristic, implies that the tragic narrative woven around Shuttleworth persists beyond her death. Thus, from start to finish, the broadside enacts as well as describes a highly charged spectacle, testing the boundaries where theatrical tragedy blurs into melodramatic excess, captivating an audience with a narrative that dramatises urgent ethical debates about execution in early nineteenth-century Scotland.



Figure 24. Illustration from 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

This figure, showing the broadside's accompanying illustration of Shuttleworth hanged on the scaffold, transcends the textual narrative and embeds the event within a visual medium, adding another layer of theatricality and emotional intensity. In the illustration, Shuttleworth's face is blackened, perhaps an attempt to anonymise or dehumanise her, and curiously contrasts with her composed, almost serene posture and modest attire, injecting a visual paradox that mirrors the complexities echoed within the verbal account. Like the verbal text, Shuttleworth is not depicted as a frantic, struggling figure but rather one resigned to her fate, offering a semblance of dignified resistance amidst her desperate predicaments. This demure depiction starkly contrasts with the visceral brutality of her punishment, constructing an image where aesthetic balance and violent reality coexist, generating a palpable tension that both intrigues and unsettles the observer. Her feet,

horizontally positioned, and hands tied behind her back differentiate her execution visually from others, such as the male figure in the Holloway case, where hands are bound in front. These distinctions in portrayals prompt questions about gendered representations, societal perceptions, and the visual narratives woven around male and female criminals. Moreover, Shuttleworth's seemingly tranquil demeanour, as reflected in both the illustration and textual description, challenges the anticipation of visible anguish and repentance that were expected from individuals in her position. While *The Trial* chapbook suggests that Shuttleworth's stoicism may hint at guilt, the broadside illustration and accompanying text afford a contrasting narrative. They portray her stoicism as a sign of dignity and martyrdom, as evidenced by the deliberate depiction of her attire and stance—implying a sense of honour and fortitude rather than remorse. As readers we must construe a myriad of emotions and ethical reflections, concurrently grappling with feelings of empathy, horror, and moral unease. The visual narrative is sombre, subdued, and monotone, with no provocative illustrations, cautionary ballads, or dying confessions of guilt. Compared to the previously discussed broadsides of the Holloway case, this document supplies a very different picture. The broadsides of Holloway's case had gory and explicit illustrations. The texts covering the story withheld nothing; all the gruesome details of how Holloway butchered his wife were enumerated. This narrative ruse stands in sharp contrast to the cautious omission of horrific specificities in the coverage surrounding Shuttleworth's case. Yet, this seemingly understated narrative strategy is far from innocuous, as Worthington posits: even if some broadsides appear 'on first impression more muted [...], it is in the body of the text that the sensationalism lies, couched in the authoritative voices of the attending surgeons'.<sup>196</sup> The broadside subtly evokes the sensational via the 'respectable Gentlemen of the town, praying for a commutation of punishment, that the feelings of the inhabitants might be spared

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196. Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective*, 16.

the horrible exhibition of a public execution—and that too of a female'.<sup>197</sup> Here, the 'authoritative voices' are those of the community leaders, who voice the public discontent regarding Shuttleworth's execution. Similarly, the scene of the religious dignitaries announcing to Shuttleworth that the petitions had been rejected is theatrically climactic:

Provost Gibson, accompanied by the Rev Dr. Paterson, communicated the result of the Petition to the unfortunate woman. She heard the tidings which extinguished the last ray of hope with great composure, and stated that it was nothing but what she expected.<sup>198</sup>

The description of Shuttleworth's last moments is also laden with a controlled, yet intense, pathos: 'protesting her innocence of the crime for which she was to suffer'. By focusing on the involvement of respected townsmen and religious figures, the broadside crafts a narrative that is as sensational as it is sombre, all without resorting to the explicit violence that characterised much of the street literature of the period.

Street literature depictions of Margaret Shuttleworth's case are multifaceted; they not only chronicle, for example, the literal act of dissection but also metaphorically illustrate the way these narratives are 'cut', 'stitched' and 'tailored' for public consumption. Street literature draws attention to its own editorial procedures, fusing various narrative modes for melo/dramatic effect, alert to an audience's relish for the disturbing specificities of violent crime. Similarly, we, as literary critics, 'dissect' these generically hybrid narratives to unearth latent meanings and cultural implications. The representation of the murderer as a 'tragic heroine' encapsulates the peculiar duality of her public image. This duality reaches its zenith on execution days, which transform into spectacles with a carnivalesque atmosphere. In doing so, the authors of these narratives stage their materials in such a way to elicit and interrogate affective excess.

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197. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

198. 'An Account of the Last Dying Words and Execution of Mrs. Shuttleworth', broadside (1821).

## 2.5 Conclusion

An examination of the Shuttleworth case through various popular print media outlets offers a panoramic view of her narrative, with each genre contributing uniquely to its interpretation. Especially compelling is the analysis of the chapbooks, which, through both visual and verbal forms, deviate from a unidimensional narrative. The chapbooks transcend a straightforward, linear recounting of the press and the melodramatic exaggeration of the broadsides to provide a multifaceted, polyphonic exploration of Shuttleworth's life and personality and the socio-cultural context. When assessing the visual and verbal interplay of *The Trial* and the *Memoir*, a meticulous orchestration of opposing energies and cadences becomes apparent. While both editions of *The Trial* adopt a stern, unforgiving tone toward Shuttleworth—even while including testimonies that cast doubt on her guilt—the *Memoir*, written after her execution, portrays her in a more compassionate light, advocating on her behalf. This shift suggests that the editors were aware of the potential influence their portrayal could have on the legal process. The posthumous reframing of her image appears calculated, allowing the editors to initiate a new conversation with the public—one that softens the harsh verdict they had previously helped reinforce. Side-by-side, these chapbooks construct Shuttleworth as a profoundly human figure—a once decent, caring woman and wife who, like any person, is susceptible to vulnerability and error. This approach encapsulates not only the discordant voices surrounding the case but also reflects the complex cultural backdrop against which it unfolded. The textual dissonance of the chapbooks echoes debates on crucial contemporary events and issues. These include the popular print treatment of convicted women, the struggle of medical jurisprudence in the early nineteenth century to gain recognition, and the impact of Scotland's diverse Christian denominations on the legal system and the portrayal of the case. Thus, street literature emerges not merely as a vehicle for sensational storytelling but as a form deeply attuned to its potential influence on public sentiment and, possibly, legal proceedings. Its capacity to

reframe the same case across time and publication venues demonstrates how it actively shapes, rather than passively records, the public understanding of criminal narratives—particularly those involving labouring-class female offenders. In doing so, street literature functions as a cultural conduit or intermediary, negotiating between legal authority, public emotion, and prevailing moral expectations.

## Chapter 3

### Murder by Poison and its Cultural Resonances in Street Literature

Murder by violence is in every case terrible enough, but it has the advantage of leaving behind it distinct evidence of the assassin's presence and deadly work. [...] But in the case of secret poisoning suspicion is lulled to rest, the assassin approaches its victim through the guarded avenues of domestic intercourse, and there are often only the faintest and most ambiguous traces of the crime.

—‘Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson, The Female Poisoner’, broadside (1862).

This broadside depicts Catherine Wilson, a nurse executed in 1862 at Newgate for allegedly poisoning several individuals in her care, including her husband.<sup>1</sup> The broadside highlights the complex stigma associated with ‘secret poisoning’ in nineteenth-century Britain, a method of murder that raises probing questions about gender roles, family dynamics, social class, and legal systems. Poisoning not only intersects with societal structures and norms but also complicates the typical narratives of violent crime. This chapter adds new insights to the scholarship by extending beyond historical analyses focused solely on procedural, judicial, and forensic aspects,<sup>2</sup> by delving into the nuanced integration of verbal and visual portrayals of female poisoners in street literature and

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1. ‘Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson, the Female Poisoner: Who Was Executed at Newgate on Monday, Oct. 20th, for the Murder of Mrs. Soames’, broadside (London: Printed for the Vendors, 1862), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 15 November 2024, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hls.libr:35161991>. The broadside claims the number of victims is eight persons, Montagu Williams claims six or seven. For more information on the case, see Montagu Stephen Williams, *Leaves of a Life, Being the Reminiscences of Montagu Williams*, Q.C. 2 vols. Vol. 1, (Poston and New York: Houghten, Mifflin and Company, The Ridgeway Press, Cambridge, 1890), 77-91, Internet Archive, accessed 21 November 2024, [https://archive.org/details/leavesoflifebein01willuoft/page/n7\(mode/2up\)](https://archive.org/details/leavesoflifebein01willuoft/page/n7(mode/2up)).

2. Sandra Hempel, *The Inheritor’s Powder: A Tale of Arsenic, Murder, and the New Forensic Science* (United Kingdom: W. W. Norton, 2013); Stephen Wade, *Yorkshire’s Murderous Women* (United Kingdom: Wharncliffe Books, 2007); Katherine Watson, *Poisoned Lives: English Poisoners and their Victims* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004); Ashley Vandepol, ‘Depictions of a Poisoner: Examining Press Coverage of Female Poisoners as a Means of Investigating Changing Ideas of Women’s Character During 19th Century England’, (Bachelor of Arts’ essay, Department Of History, The University of Victoria, 2022), accessed 26 February 2024, <https://www.uvic.ca/humanities/history/assets/docs/honours-thesis---ashley-vandepol-2022.pdf>.

regional and metropolitan media outlets, comparing these with accounts of other IPH methods of the period. The chapter also explores the distinct aesthetic strategies employed to depict poisoning, a task complicated by the nature of the crime itself. Unlike violent murder, which is immediately suspicious due to ‘distinct evidence’, poisoning often leaves ‘only the faintest and most ambiguous traces’, making both detection and dramatic representation challenging. The broadside at hand utilises an alliterative description of Catherine as the ‘demon of destruction’ and the capitalised phrase ‘**THE FEMALE POISONER**’ positioned at the centre (see Figure 25 below) to emphasise contemporary views of poison as a feminine crime to reinforce the perception of these female poisoners as unnatural or monstrous. Additionally, the phrase ‘diabolical art of death’ underscores the calculated effort needed to commit a crime of this kind. This dedication, combined with the ability to infiltrate the ‘guarded avenues of domestic intercourse’ and exploit relationships built on ‘confidence and security’, links poisoning directly with IPH. However, what distinguishes this crime is the depiction of the perpetrator standing ‘at the bedside in the guise of a friend’, feigning sympathy while administering poison. The use of sibilance (“simulated sympathies”) likens this crime to snake-like treachery, reinforcing the insidious nature of the act and contrasting sharply with more overt methods, such as in the Holloway case, where the perpetrator revealed his true intentions through strangulation and dismemberment behind closed doors. This close reading of the broadside sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how visual and verbal portrayals of female poisoners complicate the findings of historically oriented scholarship.

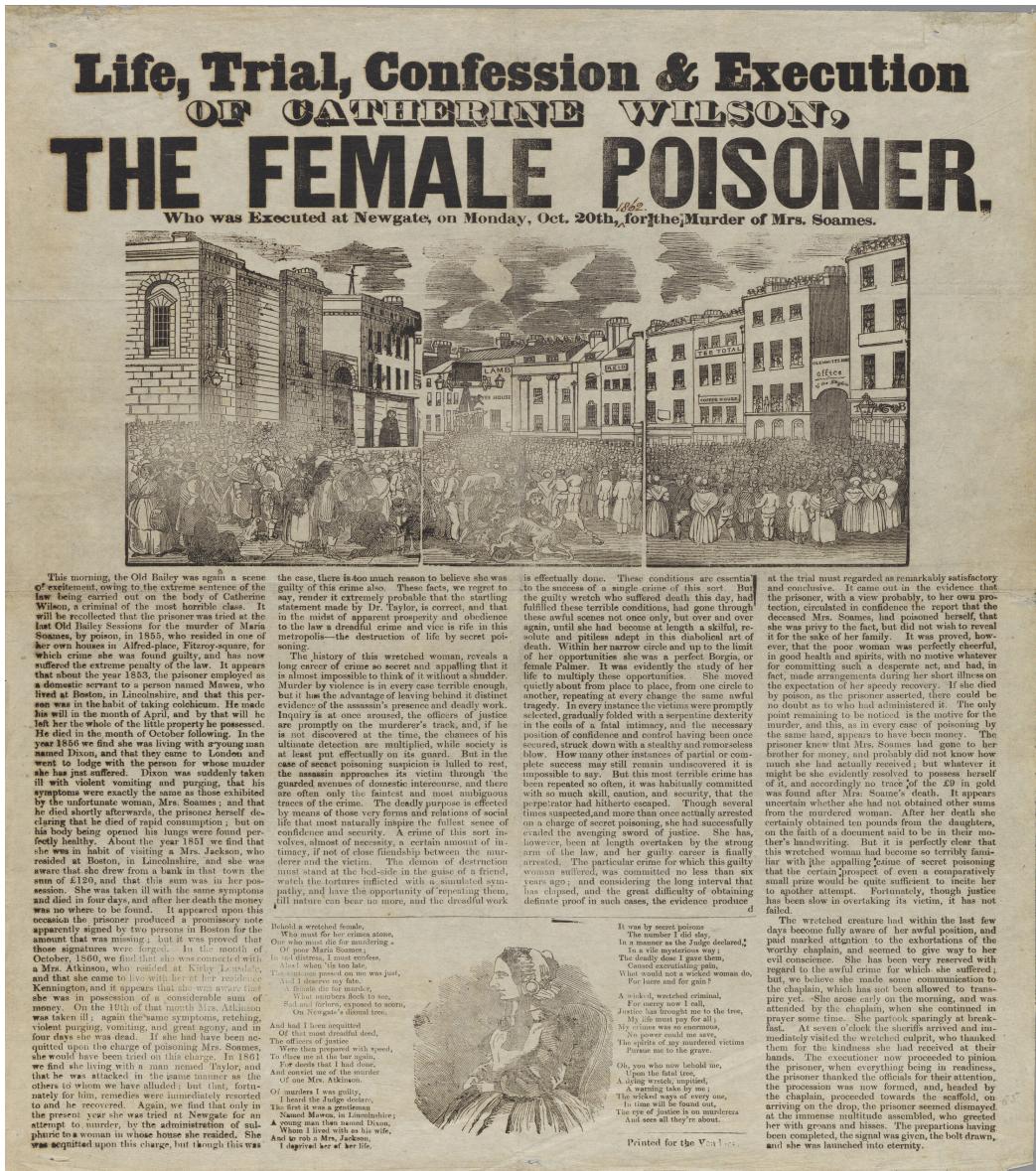


Figure 25. 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson, the Female Poisoner' broadside (1862).

The two accompanying illustrations in this broadside elucidate the tendency of street literature to highlight female poisoners' capacity for concealment and duplicity. The larger depiction showcases the public execution of Catherine in the city centre. This scene is filled with a diverse crowd of all genders, ages, and social classes, engaged in various activities—fighting, conversing, climbing streetlights, and observing from rooftops. This diversity suggests that the threat of poisoning permeates all social strata. Interestingly, the scaffold is positioned to one side rather than in the

centre, which differs from the more commonly observed layout in available broadside illustrations of an execution.<sup>3</sup> With the marginalisation of the scaffold, the scene subtly shifts focus from the state-sanctioned act of execution to the crowd's reaction. Alongside this feature, the imagery of wrestling dogs conjures ideas of unmuzzled behaviour, atavism, and degeneration. This setting reveals a morbid fascination with violence reminiscent of Roman arenas and decadent past empires rather than serving as a just measure of law enforcement. Instead, the design evokes Britain's historical enthralment with blood sports. It transforms the execution into grotesque pageantry that symbolises the primal brutality traditionally associated with public executions and underscores a voyeuristic fascination with suffering. Meanwhile, the smaller illustration of Catherine depicted alone and well-dressed with unnaturally proportioned features echoes and amplifies the verbal text's framing of female poisoners as diabolical figures, specifically referred to as a 'demon of destruction'. These exaggerated facial and bodily features, indicative of broader negative archetypes of female poisoners, will be assessed later in the chapter. This visual exaggeration works in tandem with the verbal narrative to suggest a hidden, evil nature lurking beneath a seemingly harmless exterior, effectively combining to evoke a malign presence that underscores the sinister duplicity attributed to female poisoners. This imagery is reinforced by the word 'LAMB' capitalised and inscribed on one of the buildings in the larger illustration, invoking the metaphor of a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'—a phrase rooted in Aesop's *Fables* and Christian teachings (Matthew 7:15)—symbolising the poisoner's deceitful nature.<sup>4</sup> Together, the broadside's visual and verbal elements explore the tension between

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3. See 'An Account of the Life, Trial, and Behaviour of William Barnett', broadside (Leicester: J. Fowler, printer, 1821) *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 12 September 2024, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hls.libr:912565>; 'Particulars of the Trials and Execution of John Jardine, for Attempting to Poison his Wife, and Wm. Page, for Horse Stealing, Who Were Executed at Horsemonger-Lane, This Morning', broadside (London: Birt's wholesale and retail song and ballad warehouse, 1829), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 8 September 2024, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990068928320203941>.

4. The other Christian symbolism of the lamb is found in the Gospel of John, which represents Jesus

the hidden and the exposed, the individual and the collective. They sensationalise the crime and directly link poisoning with women and IPH, highlighting the enduring societal fascination and fear of female perpetrators within the public spectacle of execution. This appraisal of the complex dynamic between what is seen and what is read is the central concern of my chapter.

The societal and cultural preoccupation with poisoning underlines its growing prevalence in nineteenth-century Britain. In 1857, Cheyne Brady claimed that poisoning had reached 'epidemic' levels, as the Register-General's reports indicated 'an average of about four hundred deaths by poison occurring in England every year'.<sup>5</sup> Supporting this view John Paget, in 'The Philosophy of Murder' (1851), observed that 'the more blatant modes of murder are generally abandoned; they are out of date', highlighting the appeal of poisoning as a discreet and devious scheme that leaves little trace.<sup>6</sup> Poisoning as a murder method was exacerbated for several reasons. First, many inexpensive and readily available domestic products could be used as poison.<sup>7</sup> Kathrine Watson states that

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Christ, the Lamb of God—embodying innocence, sacrifice, and redemption. This raises the question: does the public execution of the female poisoner symbolize sacrificial justice, absolving societal guilt and restoring moral order? This interpretation is complicated by the poisoner's depiction as deceitful and predatory, undermining the purity traditionally associated with the lamb. The illustration conveys not only the loss of innocence but also a ritualistic desire to restore it through punishment. Thus, the lamb becomes a contested symbol, reflecting both corrupted purity and the desire for redemption, encapsulating the cultural and moral tensions of nineteenth-century executions. The 'Lamb' also resonates in complex ways through the Book of Revelation.

5. Cheyne Brady (ed.), 'What Shall We Do With The Poison Trade?', *Dublin University Magazine* 49, no. 290 (1857): 161, ProQuest Historical Periodical, accessed 21 September 2024, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/what-shall-we-do-with-poison-trade/docview/6507654/se-2?accountid=14540>

6. John Paget, 1851, 'The Philosophy of Murder', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 172, accessed 27 August 2024, <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/digital-special-collections/villainy-detected/philosophy-murder#block-lehigh-content>

7. Common examples included arsenic, strychnine, cyanide, opium, and phosphorus. These substances were often present in rat poison, medicines, and industrial products. For more information, see Maria Christodoulou, 'Poisons and the Development of Toxicology in the 19th Century', *Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 26 June 2024, accessed 24 October 2024, <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/library-and-publications/library/blog/poisons-and-toxicology/>.

‘almost any substance, taken in large enough quantity, can be harmful—the dose makes the poison—but most English men and women of the past were well aware that some substances were more harmful than others’.<sup>8</sup> She adds that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, ‘over fifty different substances’ were used as poison. The opening example of the poisoner Catherine Wilson highlights this fact; she used ‘sulphuric’ acid.<sup>9</sup> Second, poison detection was nascent and underdeveloped at the time, which made it particularly appealing to an abused housewife who saw poisoning as a potential means of escaping her oppressive spouse/partner. James C. Whorton explains that like ‘medical jurisprudence in general, forensic toxicology took form in the early 1800s. [...] As a genuine scientific discipline, toxicology came into being only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks in greatest measure to the extraordinary labours of the Spaniard Mateu Orfila’.<sup>10</sup> Ian Burney adds that ‘it was not until the second decade of the nineteenth century that a systematic British work on the subject was published; earlier works being little more than selective glosses on a continental treatise tradition already well established by the sixteenth century’.<sup>11</sup> It was not until the Marsh test was created in 1836 that a credible and reliable test for poison detection was found.<sup>12</sup> Finally, until 1868, poison was easily accessible without regulation.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Watson, *Poisoned lives*, 31.

9. Watson, *Poisoned lives*, XI.

10. James C. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.

11. Ian Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 40-41, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed 12 February 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=6462889>.

12. Sandra Hempel, ‘The Art of Medicine: James Marsh and The Poison Panic’, *The Lancet*, 2013, 381 (9885): 2247-2248, *DirectScience*, accessed 28 April 2024. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)61472-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61472-5).

13. Watson, *Poisoned lives*, 42.

This outbreak garnered significant public interest, leading to widespread depictions of poisoning cases and their motifs across various literary genres. Though less overtly brutal, these cases invoked psychological tension and fears of betrayal within the home, captivating the public's imagination with their sinister undercurrents. Robert Browning's *The Laboratory* (1844) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *Ethel Churchill* (1837), employ poisoning motifs to symbolise domestic discord. Similarly, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* (1847) explores the archetype of the female poisoner. The popular press also eagerly capitalised on this intrigue. A key case in this chapter is that of Ann Barber, who in 1821 poisoned her husband in Lincolnshire, England. The case attracted significantly more public attention than the Shuttleworth case from the same year. Barber received extensive coverage in over forty newspapers and occupied significantly more space, as exemplified by *New Times* (London, August 15, 1821), which dedicated several columns to the case.<sup>14</sup> Street literature, however, treated poisoning rather differently. While two chapbooks and two broadsides covered the Barber case, the chapbooks were notably brief. This contrasts sharply with the lengthy, detailed chapbooks of more visceral crimes like the Holloway and Shuttleworth murders. This disparity suggests that while the press elaborated on poisoning through extensive narratives, street literature faced formal-stylistic challenges. Poisoning, being more subtle and lacking immediate, visible signs, did not fit well with the melo/dramatic semiotic codes favoured by chapbook and broadside designers.

As this chapter will demonstrate, street literature publishers, illustrators, writers, or poets were required to use different aesthetic skills to convey the power of poison. For example, the broadside titled 'Eight Persons Murdered! A Father, a Mother, Two Husbands, Three Children, and an Uncle, all Poisoned by Margaret Joyer, and Katherine Rentner, for which Horrid and Monstrous Crimes,

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14. 'York Assizes. Petty Treason and Murder', *New Times* (London, August 15, 1821), *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002357/18210815/022/0004>

they have been Executed' (published between 1836 and 1841) utilises poetic devices such as alliteration, caesurae, tonal gear-shifts and rhyme schemes, alongside visual elements, to sensationalise the crime and enhance its psychological impact.<sup>15</sup> The ballad reads:

Our crimes are of the deepest die;  
Such foul unheard-of crime,  
Surpassing all was ever known  
Before at any time.

Father and Mother, Children three,  
Husband and Uncle too,  
A deadly poison we prepar'd,  
'Twas certain death, tho' slow.

The steady iambic tetrameter and modified ABAB rhyme scheme, exemplified by the lines 'Our crimes are of the deepest die; / Such foul unheard-of crime', accentuate the poem's portrayal of poisoning as a premeditated and sinister act. This structured rhythm and emotionless diction are epitomised in the line 'A deadly poison we prepar'd', where the use of consonance and alliteration through the repetition of the 'p' sound draws attention to the crime's deliberate nature, emphasising the meticulous planning involved. Additionally, a caesura inferred from a natural pause after 'poison' adds a grave weight to the preparation, conveying the severity of the deed. Listing the victims as 'Father and Mother, Children three' in a stark, dispassionate manner underscores the clinical detachment with which the speaker presents each familial role, intensifying the unnaturalness of the crime against household bonds. The consistent use of quatrains throughout the poem reinforces this methodical unfolding. The format, regular rhythm and rhyme echo the cold precision of the

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15. 'Eight Persons Murdered! A Father, a Mother, Two Husbands, Three Children, and an Uncle, all Poisoned by Margaret Joyer, and Kathrine Rentner, for which Horrid and Monstrous Crimes, they have been Executed', broadside (London: James Catnach, between 1836 and 1841), *English Crime and Execution Broadsides*, Harvard Library, accessed 9 November 2024, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/crime-broadsides/catalog/46-990031855530203941>.

perpetrators' actions, making the act of poisoning appear more disquieting and eerie compared to more explicitly violent crimes.



Figure 26. 'Eight Persons Murdered!', broadside (between 1836 and 1841).

Similarly, this broadside's visual design (see Figure 26) utilises typography and symbolism to sensationalise poisoning. The first line, '**EIGHT PERSONS MURDERED!**', is centred on the page in bold, all capital letters, and in a larger font size than the surrounding text, delivering an immediate shock. Directly below, the victims are identified by their familial roles—father, mother,

children, uncle—rather than by name, signifying the betrayal inherent in the crime. The title then specifies the method of murder, with the word 'POISONED' similarly capitalised and enlarged, amplifying the heinous nature of the act. This stylistic choice compensates for the lack of overtly graphic elements, such as stabbing or dismemberment, by focusing instead on the psychological horror of poisoning.

The illustration of Margaret Joyer at the scaffold enhances the melodramatic layout. Joyer appears as fair and beautiful, with long, wavy hair and a white headscarf resembling a nun's or a bride's veil, evoking a sense of innocence and purity. Her clasped hands and sorrowful expression imply vulnerability, even repentance, inviting the viewer to feel sympathy. The illustrator is wielding a 'poison pen' to portray Joyer as mild and virtuous. Second, the rope intended to hang Joyer is depicted as being wrapped loosely around the scaffold, resembling a serpent. This visual metaphor links her act of poisoning to the biblical serpent in the Garden of Eden—a symbol of deceit and corruption. This motif also resonates in the broadside concerning Catherine Wilson: '[i]n every instance the victims were promptly selected, gradually folded with serpentine dexterity'.<sup>16</sup> This connection not only underscores the treacherous nature of her crime but also introduces a layer of irony rooted in biblical wisdom (Galatians 6:7): 'reaping what you sow', reinforcing the notion of poetic justice. She is ultimately undone by a symbol of the same corruption she embodied. Other contemporary publications also exploit this association between the biblical serpent and poison. John Paget, in 1851, argued that '[p]oisoning (the word crawls from one's pen like a snake) is the prevailing style; it combines the necessities of the time—neatness, despatch, and economy—with the

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16. 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson', broadside (1862).

most egregious and unappreciated wickedness'.<sup>17</sup> These lines tie poison—cheap, subtle, leaving no trail of blood, gore or chaos—to snakes that crawl stealthily and strike with deadly venom. This imagery parallels the serpent in the Garden of Eden: the creature's cunning and proximity within the sacred space of Eden allows it to corrupt Eve, Adam, and, ultimately, all of humanity.

Poisoning cases captivated not only contemporary observers but also recent scholars. Watson's *Poisoned Lives: English Poisoners and Their Victims*, applies a broad social-historical overview to assess the murderous use of poison in over 500 cases in England between 1750 and 1914. Her approach provides detailed statistics about the genders of the perpetrators, their occupations, and the types of poison used, situating individual cases within wider patterns and trends.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, historian Ashley Vandepol utilises the press depictions of three female poisoners during the nineteenth century, arguing that the coverage of female cases was heavily influenced by societal gender biases, which led to a sensationalised portrayal of their alleged moral transgressions, such as their infidelity and defiance of traditional marital norms, rather than the facts of the crime itself.<sup>19</sup> Vandepol proposes that the significant media attention female poisoners received stemmed primarily from their gender. The medical journalist Sandra Hempel, in her study, delves into the history of arsenic as a common poison in the nineteenth century and explores its role in both intentional and accidental deaths. The book focuses on the wider implications and the development of forensic science during that period. She examines how the methods for detecting arsenic evolved and how these advances transformed the criminal justice system, introducing a new era where scientific

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17. John Paget, 1851, 'The Philosophy of Murder', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 172, accessed 27 August 2024, <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/digital-special-collections/villainy-detected/philosophy-murder#block-lehigh-content>

18. Watson, *Poisoned lives*.

19. Vandepol, 'Depictions of a Poisoner'.

evidence began to play a crucial role in solving crimes.<sup>20</sup> Stephen Wade's analysis of murderous women across more than two centuries in Yorkshire presents a series of cases of infanticide, crimes of passion and poisoning as fictionalised short stories without referencing primary sources in the text.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Judith Knelman focuses on the press depictions of murderesses, covering cases such as infanticide, lover murder, or crimes against the elderly.<sup>22</sup> However, her main argument is that female murderers, often marginalised, poor, and oppressed, committed crimes primarily within the domestic sphere. These convicted women were seen as threats to the social order and a deviation from the image of the 'angel of the house'. She claims that the murderess's existence posed a threat to a patriarchal society that sought harshly to punish these women to regain control and maintain the social hierarchy.

My research builds on these scholarly projects by explicitly treating the verbal and visual representations of real-life trials of female poisoners in nineteenth-century British street literature, often dismissed as 'low', frivolous entertainment. This chapter argues that contrary to academic orthodoxies, street literature's verbal and visual designs create a versatile, dissonant, and intricate narrative of poisoning, revealing more progressive attitudes towards gender, justice, and morality than is commonly perceived. My approach not only addresses a critical gap left by previous researchers, which often neglects the specificity of poisoning as a murder method but also stresses that poisoning carries distinct social, legal, and cultural implications that extend beyond simple gendered interpretations.

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20. Hempel, *The Inheritor's Powder*.

21. Wade, *Yorkshire's Murderous Women*.

22. Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), accessed 16 January 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=4672202&ppg=303>.

This chapter is structured around two main sections. The first explores how poisoning is framed as a ‘feminine’ crime, incorporating discussions on monetary incentives, legal treatment, and gender comparisons. This section reveals, through gauging the visual and verbal depictions in street literature, that cultural practices like life insurance reinforced gender biases and female poisoners often faced disparate judicial responses. Despite this apparent discrimination, a side-by-side gender comparison of the verbal and visual strategies reveals not only how monetary incentives and legal punishment factor into representations of female poisoners but also how broader stylistic choices—language, narrative framing, imagery, illustrations—shape the portrayal of both male and female poisoners. These depictions rely on recurring motifs of concealment and duplicity, demonstrating that, despite gendered biases, poisoning was consistently framed through similar rhetorical and visual techniques across different media, regardless of the gender of perpetrator. The second section reveals that medical jurisprudence occupies a substantial space and is prominently featured in the depiction of poison cases. This limelight perhaps stemmed from its role as the principal means of substantiating guilty verdicts in crimes that had few to no visible clues, such as poisoning cases, even though medical evidence and poison detections were fraught with uncertainties during this period, and there were no legal regulations to uphold it. While both the press and street literature foreground medical jurisprudence, a divergence in their approaches is evident. As we will see later in this chapter, the press utilises medical testimony to prove guilt and dispel the mystery of such crimes; street literature, instead, invites multiple interpretations and welcomes uncertainty. Collectively, these sections function together by accentuating the complexity of street literature’s verbal-visual delineations of poisoning as a unique method of murder.

### 3.1 Poison as a Feminine Weapon

Perceptions of poisoning as a predominantly female crime aligned closely with the contemporary ideals of passive genteel femininity. These ideals are apparent in the refusal to acknowledge Ann Kennett as a willing accomplice in Holloway's brutal murder; instead, she was presented merely as someone who helped dispose of the body.<sup>23</sup> Her role was downplayed—rendered secondary—reflecting the same gendered assumptions that shaped cultural understandings of poisoning. This association between poison and femininity recurs across various cultural, literary, and mythological narratives, including those predating the biblical creation story. Burney argues that:

A wealth of examples spanning the millennia can be invoked: Eve's offer of the tainted fruit; Homer's treacherous Circe; Tacitus and Juvenal's matriarchal poisoners of Roman virtue; the venomous stepmother in Malory's Arthurian legend; and Jonson and Webster's courtly murderesses, to name only a few.<sup>24</sup>

In Burney's account Medea, Circe, Medusa, Milton's Sin, and Lamia serve as archetypes of female corruption and treachery, reflecting abiding anxieties about women's power to destabilise societal and moral order. Such fear of female wickedness was heightened by figures like Lucrezia Borgia, whose Renaissance notoriety was repeatedly revived in the Victorian imagination. She became an iconic symbol of duplicity and female treachery in literature and art, invoked as the archetypal female poisoner.<sup>25</sup> The passage also warns of women's ability to manipulate men through seduction, which

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23. 'The Late Murder at Brighton: (Abridged from the *Brighton Herald* of Saturday) Re-examination of Ann Kennett', *Morning Herald* (London), 5 September 1831, accessed 21 March 2025, *The British Newspaper Archive*, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002408/18310905/022/0004?browse=False>.

24. Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 21.

25. Cheryl Blake Price, 'Poison, Sensation, and Secrets in "The Lifted Veil"', *Victorian Review* 36, no. 1 (2010): 214; Victoria Puchal Terol, 'Pernicious Female Role Models and Mid-Victorian London's Stage', *Clepsydra: Revista Internacional de Estudios de Género y Teoría Feminista* 20 (February 2021): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.clepsydra.2021.20.03>; Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, 'Lucrezia Borgia as Entrepreneur', *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 53–91, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/233751>. Victorian adaptations across media testify to Borgia's enduring notoriety. Victor Hugo's play *Lucrece Borgia* (1833) and Gaetano Donizetti's opera of the same year (first performed in London in 1839) dramatised her as both monstrous and maternal. Visual artists also revived her image, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his unfinished *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860–61, Tate Britain). Her name also resonated in fiction: although not her

could weaken their integrity. While historically embedded, this gendered perception of poisoning was particularly pronounced in nineteenth-century British culture and society. George Robb argues that while lower-class women were associated with ignorance, desperation, and moral turpitude, the recently educated bourgeois housewife embodied fears of calculated treachery within respectable households. 'Nothing, however, generated greater horror than the lady fallen from virtue'.<sup>26</sup> These views fed the nineteenth-century public appetite for women's true-crime drama, particularly in London's illegitimate playhouses, courtrooms, and fairs, blending sensational, thrilling elements with moral instruction. This cultural obsession with women's crime narratives was part of a broader societal fixation, as Anne-Marie Kilday notes: 'Female killers particularly interested a society already obsessed with murder and the macabre'.<sup>27</sup>

This section assesses the gendered depictions of female poisoners in street literature and the press, with a particular focus on life insurance and legal treatment, as both were central to constructing narratives that tied women's crimes to financial motives and legal vulnerabilities. Examining references to life insurance reveals how financial motives are woven into literary portrayals, potentially amplifying the disquieting depiction of women in contexts where monetary gain is achieved through deadly means. The foregrounding of legal responses to poisoning cases

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story, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's sensation novel *Lucretia; or, The Children of Night* (1846) drew upon her notoriety by employing her name as a signal of duplicity and hidden female violence. Alongside Borgia, Giulia Tofana—a seventeenth-century Italian poisoner infamous for creating and distributing Aqua Tofana, allegedly responsible for hundreds of deaths—circulated widely in European cultural memory as an emblem of women's secret capacity for lethal manipulation.

26 George Robb, 'Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England', *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (1997): 178, accessed 18 March 2024, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A559686347/AONE?u=glasuni&sid=summon&xid=94160699>

27 Anne-Marie Kilday, 'Constructing the Cult of the Criminal: Kate Webster – Victorian Murderess and Media Sensation', in *True Crime Histories*, (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, 2020), accessed January 12, 2025, <https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/file/5536ba5a-c8d3-4492-ae2d-2836a0f6cad3/1/Chapter%206%20Kilday%20%28True%20Crime%20Histories%29.pdf>.

sheds light on the disparities in how male and female poisoners were treated and represented, thereby reflecting or challenging the entrenched gender stereotypes of the period. The section also compares portrayals of female vs male poisoners to address whether street literature and the press reinforced, complicated or debunked these stereotypes.

### 3.1.1 Female Poisoners and Monetary Incentives

During the nineteenth century, life insurance expanded across Britain, initially in provincial England and subsequently in Scotland and Ireland. Initially confined to the aristocratic market in 1800, by 1830, some companies attempted to reach the lower-middle classes with limited success. By 1850, a few insurers began tapping into the larger working-class market, competing with local burial clubs.<sup>28</sup> This growing presence of financial instruments coincided with a rise in reported domestic poisoning cases among the lower classes.<sup>29</sup> As a result, suspicions arose around women who stood to benefit financially from the deaths of their husbands and children, buttressing the gendered perception of poisoning.

The theme of monetary incentive is vividly illustrated in the broadside ballad 'Life, Trial, Sentence and Last Farewell to the World of Anne Merritt, for the Murder of James Merritt, her Husband, by Poison, on the 24th of Jan. 1850'.<sup>30</sup> The opening lines of the ballad highlight how Anne Merritt's crime is shaped by and judged through the lens of her gender and domestic identity:

Behold a wretched married woman,  
The mother of a family,

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28. Timothy L. Alborn, *Regulated Lives: Life Insurance and British Society, 1800-1914* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 19.

29. Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 32.

30. See (Figure 3), 'Life Trial Sentence and Last Farewell to the World of Anne Merritt for the Murder of James Merritt, Her Husband, by Poison, on the 24th Jan. 1850'. E. Hodges, Printer, 1843. *Crime, Punishment, and Popular Culture, 1790-1920*, accessed 21 September 2024, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/SVCIOI059495354/CPCC?u=glasuni&sid=bookmark-CPCC&pg=1](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SVCIOI059495354/CPCC?u=glasuni&sid=bookmark-CPCC&pg=1).

For the murder of her husband,

'Behold' in the opening line commands attention and imbues the narrative with Biblical gravitas, a phrase traditionally used in scripture to introduce revelations or divine commands. In the context of Anne Merritt's ballad, it presents her crimes with a tone of unearthly commandment, framing her betrayal of domestic roles as a 'married woman' and 'mother of a family' not just as a personal failing but as a moral transgression deserving divine notice. The additional descriptors labelling her as a 'Wicked, base, deceitful wife, / Barbarous and cruel mother', who schemed to poison her husband and denied her children their 'tender father' vividly amplify this betrayal. This calculated preparation and execution of the crime is evident in her actions—"The wretched woman she did go/ To a shop to buy the fatal poison/ [...] The dreadful dose she gave her husband"—along with her steadfast denial: 'she when taxed with the foul murder / strongly the deed denied', underscore her premeditated manipulation. These elements reinforce the trope of a scheming female poisoner who carefully 'plots' or orchestrates her husband's demise, casting her in the monstrous role of the unnatural woman, deviating from maternal and spousal ideals. However, the poet's repeated use of the term 'wretched' in eight out of ten verses invites readers to explore its deeper meanings. The *OED* signifies that 'wretched' encompasses a wide range of connotations that extends beyond mere contemptibility and societal disdain for her failure to conform to expected gender roles. It also connotes a 'pitiable' condition stemming from extreme adversity, such as want, which implies that her criminal actions were influenced by dire socio-economic circumstances. These lines, therefore, do more than dramatise the violation of gendered expectations; they also hint at the possibility that Merritt's crime was a reaction to the oppressive conditions of her domestic life. This underlying motive is made explicit in a later stanza:

At length suspicion fell upon her,  
And to justice she was brought,  
The sad & wretched murderer thought,  
She slew the partner of her bosom,

It was, we read for cruel gain.  
 And made her darling children orphans,  
 Distressed and overcome with pain.

This stanza introduces financial gain as a central motive for the betrayal, with the phrase ‘cruel gain’ directly pointing to the idea that monetary incentives, such as life insurance or inheritance, lay at the heart of this crime. The modified ABAB rhyme scheme formalises this narrative, using masculine rhymes (‘gain’, ‘pain’) to emphasise the cold, calculated reasoning behind the crime, particularly its financial motives. The meter further reinforces this dynamic. The opening lines flow steadily: ‘At length suspicion fell upon her, / And to justice she was brought’. Combined with the following lines—“The sad & wretched murderer thought, / She slew the partner of her bosom”—these create a rhythm that mimics control and order, suggesting premeditation. However, this stability is disrupted in the subsequent lines: ‘It was, we read for cruel gain, / And made her darling children orphans’. ‘Distressed and overcome with pain’, the concluding line, halts the flow entirely, reinforcing the devastation wrought upon her family. This poetic framing draws on the image of a woman who abandons her nurturing role, transforming into a figure capable of unbridled malice and the betrayal of familial and societal trust. Somewhere between these extremes, she emerges as a figure who is neither entirely a victim nor purely cruel but somewhat shaped by domestic hardships. The revelation of material gain as her motive complicates her portrayal, presenting her as a multi-dimensional character caught between villainy and victimhood, balancing moral corruption with socio-economic struggles and challenging gender norms and societal expectations. The phrase ‘we read’ accentuates this ambiguity by implying that her story is mediated through press accounts rather than direct knowledge, subtly subverting the notion of her as inherently cruel while simultaneously portraying her as ‘sad & wretched’. This verbal strategy raises the question of whether her portrayal is shaped more by print narrative conventions than by objective truth.



Figure 27. 'Life Trial Sentence and Last Farewell to the World of Anne Merritt, Her Husband, by Poison, on the 24th Jan. 1850', E. Hodges, Printer.

Interestingly, while the text presents Merritt as both 'wretched' and 'wicked', the illustration (see Figure 27) focuses only on her scheming, manipulative side, perhaps to highlight how such women were perceived superficially by outsiders. Anne is positioned close to her ailing, bedridden husband, who appears weak and vulnerable. Her body language conveys a calm and caring demeanour, with

her bosom facing him and one hand resting gently on him. This imagery, signalling his reliance on Anne, highlights the depth of her violation—not only of her legal obligations but also of deeply ingrained moral and social expectations. Meanwhile, the presence of an official leaning in to inquire about the husband's condition conveys the initial trust placed in Anne as a devoted wife. Her actions ultimately shatter this trust. This interplay between text and illustration sensationalises her betrayal by portraying her as a woman capable of killing her husband for money without remorse, all while maintaining the facade of a self-sacrificing caregiver to both her community and her husband until his demise, thereby heightening the cultural tension surrounding female poisoners.

This financial incentive is also mirrored in 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson, The Female Poisoner' broadside from 1862. The stanza reads:

It was by secret poisons  
 The number I did slay,  
 In a manner as the Judge declared,  
 In a vile mysterious way;  
 The deadly dose I gave them,  
 Caused excruciating pain,  
 What would not a wicked woman do,  
 For lucre and for gain?<sup>31</sup>

By questioning the extent of a 'wicked woman['s] actions for 'lucre and gain', the text universalises Wilson's guilt, transforming her from an isolated criminal case into a symbolic representation of female moral failure. This text suggests that unchecked female ambition and financial motives render them capable of unimaginable transgressions. Wilson's crime, portrayed as morally 'vile', with its calculated and heartless nature '[f]or lucre and gain', stands in sharp contrast to the 'excruciating pain' inflicted upon her victims, further amplifying the horror of her deeds. Through this device, the stanza intensifies its didactic function, presenting Wilson's story as a lesson about the corrupting

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31. 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson', broadside (1862).

influence of greed and the necessity of adhering to accepted standards of female virtue.

This theme is also explored in the mainstream press. An article published in the *Hampshire Telegraph* (Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> 1848), claimed that

A contemporary calls attention to the poisonings which have become a practice among certain classes of the population, for the sake of gain, by frauds on insurance-offices and burial-clubs; and shows reasons for supposing that the known cases are but a few instances of a crime which is to a wide extent undetected, especially in the factory districts. At Preston, where 23,000 members are enrolled in three burial-societies, statistics suggest a very dark suspicion.<sup>32</sup>

The article reflects societal misgivings about moral decay among the labouring class. The use of ‘practice’ suggests that these acts were perceived not as isolated incidents but as part of a broader systemic issue, even a cultural crisis, where financial desperation could drive individuals to murder for profit. The mention of people registering others, particularly children, in multiple burial societies with the anticipation of their death for financial gain illustrates how this grim ‘practice’ had become normalised in some social circles. The article’s focus on female figures, such as ‘hired nurses’, bolsters the notion that among women, even those in care-giving roles, many poisoners lurked undetected.

### 3.1.2 Female Poisoners in the Eyes of the Law

Building on the previous section, which explored how the expansion of life insurance contributed to growing suspicions surrounding women in street literature, I address here how verbal-visual portrayals in such cultural production reflect the gendered legal punishment of female poisoners in cases of IPH. These narratives manifest in two distinct ways: first, the use of poison often carried connotations of witchcraft, signalling deep-seated worries that criminal women were ‘unnatural’. For

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32. ‘Poisoning Children For The Sake of Gain’, *Hampshire Telegraph* (Hampshire, England), 5 August 1848, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 11 October 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000069/18480805/028/0006>.

example, the twelfth-century *Leges Henrici Primi*, an early English legal text, categorised poisoning alongside witchcraft—a connection that persisted for centuries.<sup>33</sup> Second, when women, particularly wives, used poison to kill their husbands, the crime was not treated as simple murder but as petty treason—a violation of norms more severe than ordinary homicide. Under English common law, petty treason was distinguished from ordinary murder due to the specific social relationships and duties of loyalty involved. As outlined in the Treason Act of 1351, petty treason occurred when a person murdered someone to whom they owed ‘faith and obedience’—such as a wife killing her husband, a servant killing their master or mistress, or a priest killing their ecclesiastical superior. The additional stigma and harsher punishments associated with petty treason—such as burning at the stake or drawing and quartering—underscore the seriousness with which these breaches of obedience were viewed. This act remained in effect until the early nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Such judicial framing of poisoning as petty treason mirrored grave concerns about the disruption of patriarchal authority within the household. At the same time, its alignment with witchcraft revealed cultural anxieties about women’s capacity for covert, subversive acts that defied the natural order.

These dual frameworks not only shaped legal outcomes but also influenced cultural representations. Street literature, with its broad reach and vivid portrayals, was particularly effective at embedding these motifs into the public consciousness, illustrating the complex interplay between cultural dread, hegemonic power, and the portrayal of female poisoners. In the Ann Barber case press coverage, many articles were titled ‘Petty Treason and Murder’, such as those published in *The British Mercury* (London) and *The London Moderator* on August 15, 1821. The articles reported the verdict being read to Ann Barber: ‘You have been found guilty of the dreadful crime of murder, and

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33. Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 21.

34. ‘Legal history: England & common law tradition: Treason’, Bodleian Libraries, accessed 8 September 2024, <https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/law-histcom/treason>

a murder of a very aggravated nature, in as much as it was the murder of your husband, whom by your marriage vows, you were bound to love and cherish'.<sup>35</sup> However, the article does not specify whether the harsh verdict was because it was a female poisoning specifically or if it reflects a more profound disdain for women killing their husbands, regardless of the method used. Similarly, the broadside, 'A brief account of the trial and execution of Ann Barber', included a concluding paragraph that named five women who were also convicted of killing their husbands:

There have been five women in the Castle for petit Treason in the last 70 years, viz. Mary Ellah, hanged and burnt in 1757; Ann Sowerby, hanged and burnt in 1767; Eliz. Boardingham, of Flambro', hanged and burnt in 1776; Ellen Bayston for poisoning her husband in 1785, ordered to be kept in York Castle for life, being insane; and the above Ann Barber.<sup>36</sup>

The mention of the other five cases who received the same verdict of petty treason raises questions: why these women specifically, and were they all poisoners? The common thread seems to be that they all conspired and planned to murder their husbands, either with poison or other techniques. Mary Ellah killed her husband by hitting him in the head with an axe.<sup>37</sup> In the 1767 case of Ann Sowerby, Ann, along with her lover John Douglas of Osgodby, were charged with the murder of their spouses.<sup>38</sup> On March 20, 1776, Elizabeth Boardingham was the last person executed by burning

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35. 'Petty Treason and Murder', *The British Mercury* (London, 15 August 1821), *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002772/18210815/029/0008>; 'Petty Treason and Murder', *The London Moderator* (London, 15 August 1821), *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002761/18210815/030/0008>.

36. 'A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber, Behind the castle at York, (this day) Monday, August 13, 1821, for the Murder of Her Husband James Barber, by Poison', broadside (York: William Michael Carrall, 1821), ProQuest Periodicals Archive Online: Pamphlets and Ephemeral Works, accessed 26 February 2024, <https://www.proquest.com/pao/docview/2823513726/DA6A7936DF444136PQ/5?accountid=14540&sourcetype=Pamphlets%20&%20Ephemeral%20Works>

37. 'Mary Ellah – 1757', *British Executions*, accessed 1 May 2024, <http://www.britishexecutions.co.uk/execution-content.php?key=6442&termRef=Mary+Ellah>.

38. 'Ann Sowerby of Escrick, 10 Aug 1767', *York Castle Prison: Family History*, accessed 1 May 2024, <http://www.yorkcastleprison.org.uk/family-history/condemned/Ann+Sowerby+of+Escrick>.

at the stake in Yorkshire for the murder of her husband with her lover; she was charged with petty treason for violating gender norms of eighteenth-century England, while her lover was sentenced to hanging.<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, the case of Ann Sowerby highlights the stark contrast in legal treatment between men and women. Both Ann and her male accomplice poisoned their spouses to be together and were tried for the same crime by the same jury and judges. Yet, while the male defendant was acquitted, Sowerby faced the full force of the law. She was convicted of petty treason, drawn on a sledge to the place of execution, and burned.<sup>40</sup> While it is difficult to claim that Ann Sowerby's verdict was solely due to gender bias, the absence of any explanation for the contrasting verdicts or Douglas's acquittal reinforces the perception of bias. To assess this potential disparity, further scrutiny of male poisoners and wife murderers is necessary. To ensure a more valid comparison, the same York Castle list of male poisoners is reviewed, focusing on a similar time frame as the female list published in the broadside. Among these poisoners were Robert Turner of Low Worsall, who killed his ex-lover, the mother of his child, with arsenic in 1814; John Scott of Northowram, who poisoned his pregnant lover and the mother of his three-year-old son in 1774; John Wilkinson of Holbeck, who murdered his wife with arsenic poisoning in 1805; Thomas Knapton of Potternewton, convicted of murdering his sweetheart by poisoning in 1784; and John Robinson of Mickleby near Whitby, who poisoned his pregnant servant and lover in 1807.<sup>41</sup> This review reveals that several men who had poisoned their intimate partners were convicted of murder and executed

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39. '1000 Years of Justice at York Castle: Elizabeth Boardingham', *History of York*, accessed 3 May 2024, <http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/timeline/georgian/elizabeth-boardingham>.

40. 'Ann Sowerby of Escrick, 10 Aug 1767', *York Castle Prison: Family History*.

41 'Arsenic', *York Castle Prison: Family History*, accessed 1 May 1 2024, <http://www.yorkcastleprison.org.uk/family-history.html>.

by hanging, while some were acquitted. In contrast, women were subjected to the harsher punishment of being dragged to the execution site, burned, and hanged, having been convicted of petty treason. This disparity underscores a deep-seated bias in the legal system, particularly in cases involving intimate relationships. This bias was also evident in public consciousness, as shown in the previous broadside, where the publisher/printer chose to list names of women convicted of petty treason while omitting their male counterparts. This selective narrative strategy frames women's crimes—particularly those against their husbands—as egregious violations of societal norms. As a result, this framing may have heightened their moral and emotional weight at the time, potentially drawing greater public attention and legitimising more severe legal punishment.

While it is established that women who killed their husbands received petty treason verdicts regardless of the method of murder they used, in Ann Barber's case, a ruling was pronounced within minutes, according to 'Assizes. York, August 10' published in *Star* (London) on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1821: 'The trial occupied the Court in seven hours. —The Jury, after retiring six minutes and a half, pronounced the prisoner Guilty of Murder and Petit Treason'.<sup>42</sup> The same was also announced in the 'Petit Treason and Murder' published in *Globe* (London) on 16 August 1821.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the chapbook *A Particular Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber* stated that '[t]he jury retired for ten minutes, and found a verdict of guilty'.<sup>44</sup> A chapbook covering the case of Rebecca Worlock, who was accused of poisoning her husband in 1820, stated: 'The Jury have consulted for about

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42. 'Assizes. York, August 10', *Star* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002646/18210815/009/0004>.

43. 'Petit Treason and Murder', *Globe* (London), 16 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001651/18210816/018/0004>.

44. *A Particular Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber, Who Was Executed at York on Monday the 18th August, 1821, Convicted of the Horrid Murder of James Barber, Her Own Husband, by Poisoning with White Arsenic*, chapbook (London: Booksellers, 1821), accessed 27 February 2024, [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/A\\_Particular\\_Account\\_of\\_the\\_Trial\\_and\\_Ex/0LvXEuQpe64C?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/A_Particular_Account_of_the_Trial_and_Ex/0LvXEuQpe64C?hl=en&gbpv=0).

seven minutes [and] returned with a verdict of GUILTY'.<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, in the 1829 John Jardine male poisoner case, it took the Jury more than 'half an hour' to reach a guilty verdict.<sup>46</sup> This contrast in the expediency and severity of verdicts involving female versus male poisoners sets the stage for gauging how the entrenched stereotypes of witches influenced both the visual and verbal portrayals of female poisoners, anchoring these historical prejudices more deeply in the public imaginary.



Figure 28. The second illustration of the broadside 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine' (1862).

The illustration of Catherine Wilson in the opening broadside (see Figure 28) builds on visual elements historically associated with witchcraft, underlining the strong link between female

45. *Trial of Rebecca Worlock, at the Gloucester Assizes, on Monday, August 14, 1820; for Murdering Her Husband, by Mixing Arsenic with Beer, in the Parish of Bitton*, chapbook (London: W. Meller & Son, [1908]), *Studies in Scarlet: Marriage and Sexuality in the U.S. & U.K., 1815–1914*, Harvard Library, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/studies-in-scarlet/catalog/41-990044037340203941>.

46. 'Particulars of the Trials and Execution of John Jardine', broadside (1829).

poisoners and witches.<sup>47</sup> She is depicted with exaggerated features—a large nose, thick brows, and large eyes—deliberately aged to enhance her resemblance to a witch. Further, her disproportionate body—a huge face and thick back contrasting with a small hand with a pointed index finger—heightens the sense of physical abnormality, a common trope in witch imagery.<sup>48</sup> The pointed index finger could symbolise an accusatory, manipulative nature, while her seemingly unnatural proportions signal her divergence from standards of genteel femininity. Such visual exaggerations reinforce the cultural association between witches and female poisoners, aligning her with monstrosity and evoking nineteenth-century misgivings about women whose powers are shadowy and clandestine, and so inhuman.



Figure 29. Madeleine Smith, July 11, 1857, *Illustrated Times*.

47. 'Life, Trial, Confession & Execution of Catherine Wilson', broadside (1862).

48. Lyndal Roper, *The Witch in the Western Imagination* (United States: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 96.

An analogous treatment is also apparent in Madeleine Smith's portrait published in the *Illustrated Times* (see Figure 29).<sup>49</sup> According to the article, Madeleine 'occupies a very different rank in the social scale'; unlike her lover, who came from 'very poor and destitute circumstances', 'she was the daughter of a retired architect, moved in the best Glasgow circles, was handsome and accomplished, and received her finishing education at a boarding school near London'.<sup>50</sup> The portrait of Miss Madeleine Hamilton Smith, drawn during her trial, appears to have been sketched from the side of the court and captures her among other spectators. Madeleine is depicted wearing full winter attire, including a stylish bonnet and a dark, large cloak with white gloves. She has a tall face with a big downward-pointing nose, large, dull eyes, small, thin lips, a prominent chin, and a curly hairline that neatly frames her face. Despite being only 22 at the time of the trial, she appears older in the portrait. In addition, she seems to be holding a small, dark, and decorated metal bottle, which contrasts with her pristine white gloves. The bottle's presence hints at associations with witchcraft potions and serves as a broader commentary on the nature of poison—often recognisable only in hindsight yet unnoticed by its victim/s until too late. Furthermore, by placing the bottle in her hand, the newspaper seems to allude to Smith's guilt, despite the jury returning a verdict of 'not proven' due to insufficient evidence. The spectators surrounding Madeleine are also carefully rendered, with several men and a woman depicted in the same realistic style, their attire receiving particular attention. While this scrupulous depiction may convey a broader societal message, poisoners can be hidden among us, regardless of class or outward appearance. The presence of another woman in the

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49. The portrait of Madeleine Smith is taken from 'Glasgow Poisoning Case: Trial of Miss Madeleine Smith for Poisoning Her Lover, Emile L'Angelier', *Extra Number of the Illustrated Times* (London), 11 July 1857, accessed 2 June 2024, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=RfbgQxzo9C0C>.

50. 'Glasgow Poisoning Case', *Extra Number of the Illustrated Times*, 11 July 1857, 1.

scene, rendered with soft, gentle features, serves as a dramatic foil, symbolically emphasising Madeleine's unnatural appearance.

A telling example of how old age and exaggerated facial features—a sharp nose, pointy chin, dark eyes, curly hair, thin lips—were used as visual stereotypes of witchcraft is evident in a striking engraving of a witch included in the later nineteenth-century edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), published by W. Tegg in 1884 (see Figure 30).<sup>51</sup>

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51. Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London: W. Tegg, 1884), Internet Archive, accessed 30 September 2025, <https://archive.org/details/demonologywitchc00scotiala>. In addition, Julia A. Phillips observes, 'It was the otherworldly portrayal of Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth*, however, which made a strong immediate impression from the moment they first appeared on stage, and they continued to inspire the enormous popularity of the play over the subsequent centuries'. She further notes that 'In the Victorian era, *Macbeth* featured regularly in theatrical performances, concerts, readings, lectures, and community events'. Julia A. Phillips, *Witchcraft and the Fourth Estate in Victorian Britain* (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2014), 83, <http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>.



Figure 30. Engraving of a witch from *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*.

Such traits echo contemporary descriptions in *The Observer*, published on 25 August 1811, in one telling case, 'a very old woman, aged 77, who for many years past has been considered by the superstitious as a witch, and whose outward appearance would certainly seem to such persons a most undeniable proof of their superstitions'.<sup>52</sup> Similar assumptions appear decades later in *Ainsworth's Magazine* (London, January 1849), where W. Francis Ainsworth asserts that witches

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52. 'Witchcraft', *The Observer*, 25 August 1811, 2, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 30 September 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/witchcraft/docview/473784328/se-2?accountid=14540>.

possessed certain fixed physical characteristics.<sup>53</sup> As seen in the *Illustrated Times* portrait of Madeleine Smith, these exaggerated facial features imply a deliberate editorial ploy to distort her likeness in alignment with witch-like imagery. This artistic tactic is apparent through the illustration's inconsistency with both her actual photograph and the sketch drawn during her trial (see Figure 31).<sup>54</sup>



Figure 31. To the left is a 'Sketch of Madeleine Smith at the trial', and to the right is the actual photo of Madeline Smith.

In both the actual photograph and the 'accurate' sketch published in John Morrison's trial report, Madeleine Smith appears younger, with a straight nose and smooth hair, giving her a softer and less

53. W. Francis Ainsworth, 'Witches and Witchcraft', *Ainsworth's Magazine* 15 (January 1849): 91, ProQuest Historical Periodicals, accessed 30 September 2025, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/witches-witchcraft/docview/4144265/se-2>.

54. The sketch is taken from John Morrison, Esq., Advocate, *A Complete Report of the Trial of Miss Madeline Smith: For the Alleged Poisoning of Pierre Emile L'Angelier* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1857), Wellcome Collection, accessed 28 January 2025, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/f8bc2w7u>; the actual photo is from *The Madeleine Smith Collection*, Glasgow Libraries Catalogue, accessed 27 January 2025, <https://libcat.csglasgow.org/web/arena/smith>.

menacing appearance. The verbal text presents a more complex portrayal, acknowledging her youth and delicate form while stressing her ‘sharp and prominent’ facial features: ‘a very young lady of short stature and slight form, with features sharp and prominent, and restless and sparkling eye’.<sup>55</sup> This description does not outright contradict the illustration but complements it by reinforcing the notion that ties facial sharpness with malice.

This association of female poisoners with witches in street literature and other popular print media outlets evokes the nineteenth-century British obsession with physiognomy—the belief that facial features could reveal moral character. Sharrona Pearl asserts this connection: ‘Call it gut instinct. Call it a sense. Call it experience. Call it what you will, but acknowledge that it is there—we judge others when we look at them. For a long time, it was called physiognomy’.<sup>56</sup> Physiognomy functioned not only as a visual and rhetorical tool; it blurred the line between the poisoner and the witch and shaped, in sometimes decisive ways, public perceptions and legal outcomes or ‘judgements’.

### 3.1.3 Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Poisoners

As seen so far, while certain aspects of the depiction of female poisoners in street literature exploit the gendered perception of poisoning—linking them with witches and/or fortune hunters—these cultural productions allow scope for more intricate messaging about crime and punishment. Such narratives also resist swift moral judgments, presenting female poisoners as flawed individuals whose crimes, though condemned, are also humanised in significant ways. This complexity suggests that rather than rigidly adhering to gendered stereotypes, street literature engages with poisoning in ways

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55. ‘Glasgow Poisoning Case’, *Extra Number of the Illustrated Times*, 11 July 1857, 1.

56. Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (United States: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

that acknowledge both social anxieties and individual agency. A prime example is the ballad in 'The Sorrowful Lamentation of Rachel Edwards and Her Servant Maid' broadside, which portrays Rachel Edwards—who conspired with her maid to poison and murder her husband in 1822—not as entirely wicked nor wholly innocent. Instead, Edwards appears as a figure shaped by conflicting emotions and an ambiguous moral standing.<sup>57</sup> In the ballad's opening stanza, Edwards speaks directly to the '[g]ood people' gathered at her execution. She introduces herself by name and mentions her hometown, setting the stage for her forthcoming confession of the crime:

Rachel Edward is my name, you hear  
From Pontypool, in Monmouthshire,  
I own I poison'd my bosom friend,  
And now my joys are at an end.

The use of a first-person narrator effectively humanises Rachel, making her relatable by positioning her as an ordinary citizen from a familiar social background. This narrative technique allows her to share her story directly, fostering a connection with the audience. However, this intimacy also enables deceit, as Rachel controls the narrative, potentially manipulating her portrayal to justify her actions or elicit undeserved sympathy. The inherent tension between her self-presentation and her murderous actions invites readers to question her reliability. This strategy enriches the narrative, presenting Rachel as a multifaceted individual whose everyday appearance may distract from more unsettling psychic drives, thereby exploring deeper issues of morality and human motivation. The same strategy is applied later by stating the maid's full name, 'Mary Sandbrook is my servant maid', which situates both characters as relatable and recognisable voices.

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57. 'The sorrowful lamentation of Rachel Edwards, and her servant maid, who are committed to Monmouth Gaol for poisoning her husband, in Pontypool, Monmouthshire, on Saturday, June 20th, 1822', broadside, *Borowitz True Crime Digital Collection*, Kent State Library, accessed 12 September 2024, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/11452>

The interplay of perspective, syntax, and cadence underscores the paradoxical portrayal of Rachel. The ballad's regular AABB rhyme scheme suggests discipline and control, establishing a steady pulse which encourages a reading of Rachel's crime as methodically planned rather than chaotic. The opening lines, with their end-stopped rhymes, set the tone:

Good people all I pray attend,  
To these few lines which I have penn'd,  
Two criminals confin'd we lie,  
Our crime is of the deepest die.

The rhyme scheme allows the speaker to modulate the tenor of this verbal performance. For example, when Rachel recounts how the poison was administered, the rhyme softens the impact of the crime:

An ounce of arsenic as you shall hear,  
They gave to him as it doth appear,  
This dismal draught then he did take,  
Then soon he was in a dreadful state.

'[H]ear/appear' and 'take/state' lend the lines a smoother flow, making the act of murder seem routine or inevitable rather than horrific or unexpected. This rhythmic regularity presents Rachel's crime in a brisk, less sensational manner, potentially easing the audience into a more sympathetic view of her actions.

The ballad's syntax is equally important in shaping how Rachel is perceived. The syntax is uncluttered and direct, with terse, declarative lexis bolstering a confessional tone. This artful simplicity makes her confession appear genuine and unaffected, as though she is laying bare her soul to the audience: 'I own I poison'd my bosom friend,/And now my joys are at an end'. The plainness of this admission, referring to her husband as her 'bosom friend', evokes sympathy by conveying the personal, intimate nature of the relationship she destroyed. Her phrasing downplays the brutality of her crime, portraying it as a tragic mistake rather than a premeditated act of violence. The unadorned simplicity of her syntax—making her sound more like a remorseful sinner not a cold-

blooded killer—prompts the audience to focus on Rachel's emotional turmoil rather than the grave moral or legal consequences of her actions. However, in the following stanza, she tries to shift some of the blame for the crime onto her servant maid:

My servant maid as you shall hear,  
She help'd to poison her master dear,  
The first druggist did her deny,  
She was resolv'd the next to try.

This subtle deflection of responsibility reinforces Rachel's portrayal as someone caught in a tragic situation beyond her control. Rachel's focus on her maid's determination to buy the poison distracts from the premeditated nature of her crime.<sup>58</sup> By moving culpability onto her maid, Rachel presents herself as less blameworthy, implying that external factors played a decisive role in her actions and thereby reducing her accountability. Here Rachel manipulates both the audience and the moral judgment of her crime, masking her true intentions and complicating the perception of her guilt.

What makes the ballad noteworthy is that while Rachel first confesses, and speaks of her maid in the first person, the act of poisoning is recorded in the third person:

An ounce of arsenic as you shall hear,  
They gave to him as it doth appear,  
This dismal draught then he did take,  
Then soon he was in a dreadful state.

This narrative shift distances Rachel from direct involvement in the crime, as though attempting to minimise her accountability or dissociate the act from the earlier, more vulnerable persona revealed in her confession. However, after the third-person narration of the crime, there is a momentary change into the first person from the victim's viewpoint. This allows his perspective to emerge before reverting to Rachel's narration. The victim's voice is heard first:

Farwell to you my cruel wife,

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58. This motif of friendship/complicity crossing the mistress-servant divide becomes a prominent plot device in later sensation fiction of the mid-century, such as in works by Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, where the intimate yet hierarchical relationships are key to the unfolding drama and suspense.

You've robb'd me of my precious life,  
Now to the Lord pray night and day,  
And beg for pardon—make no delay.

The victim's words disclose the raw reality of his anguish and the severity of the betrayal ('my cruel wife'). This stress on cruelty marks the return to Rachel's narration:

And when cruel deed was done,  
Like one distracted we did run,  
For murder is a cruel sin,  
And makes us tremble every limb.

The audience is now more attuned to the weight and force of her crime. The back-and-forth between Rachel's confessional voice, the detached third-person narrator, and the victim's brief, agonised interjection transforms the ballad into a battleground for the audience's sympathies, offering a more nuanced portrayal than the one-dimensional depiction often found in the mainstream press.

The following discussion expands upon how street literature challenges the notion of poisoning as a gendered crime by foregrounding depictions of both male and female poisoners through two key aspects: the frequency of publications and the nature of their treatment. The incidence of representations of poisoners reveals a notable pattern: male and female poisoners were often reported together, given analogous space in publications, and treated with similar levels of narrative attention. This pattern challenges the assumption that poisoning was exclusively framed as a female crime, suggesting instead that street literature presented it as a broader social concern rather than a strictly gendered one. The consistent pairing of male and female poisoners within the same publications indicates that, at least in terms of visibility, their crimes were not inherently differentiated by gender. Such a pattern is evident in *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery*, a volume that includes four chapbooks on poisoners—three involving male cases and the fourth covering *The Trial of Ann Barber: At York Assizes, Aug. 10th, 1821, for the Murder of Her Husband*. All these cases occurred within a short period of each other. *Revenge against Murder* provides detailed

coverage of each case in individual chapbooks and features an illustrated collage of these murders in the 'FRONTISPICE' (see Figure 32).<sup>59</sup> This graphic element plays on the sensational:



Figure 32. The front piece of *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery*.

This trend is not limited to street literature; a similar approach is also apparent in the press. For instance, the James Cawthorne case, in which he was accused of poisoning his twenty-six-year-old wife in 1821, garners a level of attention like that of Ann Barber, with over forty newspaper articles

59. The frontispiece of *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery, Exemplified in The Trial and Execution of James Emery, for Poisoning Sarah King, on the 29th of May 1821; William Akers, For Murdering Patience Ellis, the 19th of June 1821; Ann Barber, For Poisoning her Husband, on the 16th of March 1821; Reuben Collins, For administering Poisonous Drugs, &c. to Hannah Stammers, who was pregnant by him* (London: Jh. & H. Bailey), *The Making of Modern Law: Trials, 1600–1926*, University of Glasgow Library, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Q0101667961/MMLT?u=glasuni&sid=bookmark-MMLT&xid=76a77ca4&pg=1>

covering the story. Moreover, several newspapers covering Ann Barber report other poisoning cases on the same page; for example, *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* (London) newspaper on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1821, features 'Execution of Ann Barber' and 'J. Cawthorne's murder of his wife by arsenic' on the same page.<sup>60</sup> The similar level of scrutiny given to poisoners, irrespective of their gender, contradicts Ashley Vandepol's finding that

[p]oisoning cases involving women were particularly reported, regardless of the relatively small instance of that crime (around forty cases) during a hundred-year period. Female poisoners defied the Victorian ideological vision of female passivity, ensuring that their crimes would garner abundant public attention.<sup>61</sup>

Vandepol argues that the primary reason for the widespread coverage of the Ann Barber case is gender. However, it seems that the act of poisoning itself, rather than the perpetrator's gender was the key factor drawing the interest of the press. By placing Barber's crime alongside those of male poisoners, these newspapers accentuated the seriousness of poisoning as a crime that transcended gender, emphasising the perceived threat it posed to social order.<sup>62</sup>

Two chapbooks covering the cases of Ann Barber and James Emery, published together in the

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60. 'Execution of Ann Barber', *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* (London), 16 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001255/18210816/031/0003>

61. Ashley Vandepol, 'Depictions of a Poisoner: Examining Press Coverage of Female Poisoners as a Means of Investigating Changing Ideas of Women's Character During 19th Century England' (BA thesis, Department of History, The University of Victoria, 2022), 1-2, accessed 26 February 2024,  
<https://www.uvic.ca/humanities/history/assets/docs/honours-thesis---ashley-vandepol-2022.pdf>.

62. Several newspaper's articles reflected similar tendency, see: *British Press* (London), 17 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002643/18210817/016/0004>; 'Murder of a Husband by His Wife'. *Stamford Mercury* (Stamford, England), 17 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000237/18210817/019/0004>; 'York, Aug 10', *Saint James's Chronicle*, (London), 14 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002193/18210814/013/0003>; *New Times* (London), 14 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002357/18210814/019/0004>.

same volume, permit us to test the accuracy of this reading. These chapbooks offer a unique insight into whether the gender of the accused decisively shaped their portrayals, revealing potential discrepancies or reinforcing shared narrative patterns. *The Trial of Ann Barber* chapbook describes Barber's life with her husband, their marriage in 1804, and how '[t]hey had lived very happily till a young man of the name of William Thompson came to live with them at Martinmas last'.<sup>63</sup> Also, the chapbook includes the testimony of Mary Calvert, a neighbour who saw Ann Barber as 'a very quiet' and 'hard working woman'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the chapbook *Trial and Execution of James Emery* positions him as 'a decent looking young man, about 25 years of age'.<sup>65</sup> These initial character sketches signal that such crime narratives share a common approach—emphasising the ostensibly kind, unassuming or mild-mannered demeanour of a poisoner, regardless of gender.

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63. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 15

64. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 17.

65. *Trial and Execution of James Emery, At Chelmsford Assizes, August 10th, 1821, For The Murder of Sarah King*, chapbook, in *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery*, (London: Jh. & H. Bailey), *The Making of Modern Law: Trials, 1600–1926*, University of Glasgow Library, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Q0101667961/MMLT?u=glasuni&sid=bookmark-MMLT&xid=76a77ca4&pg=1>

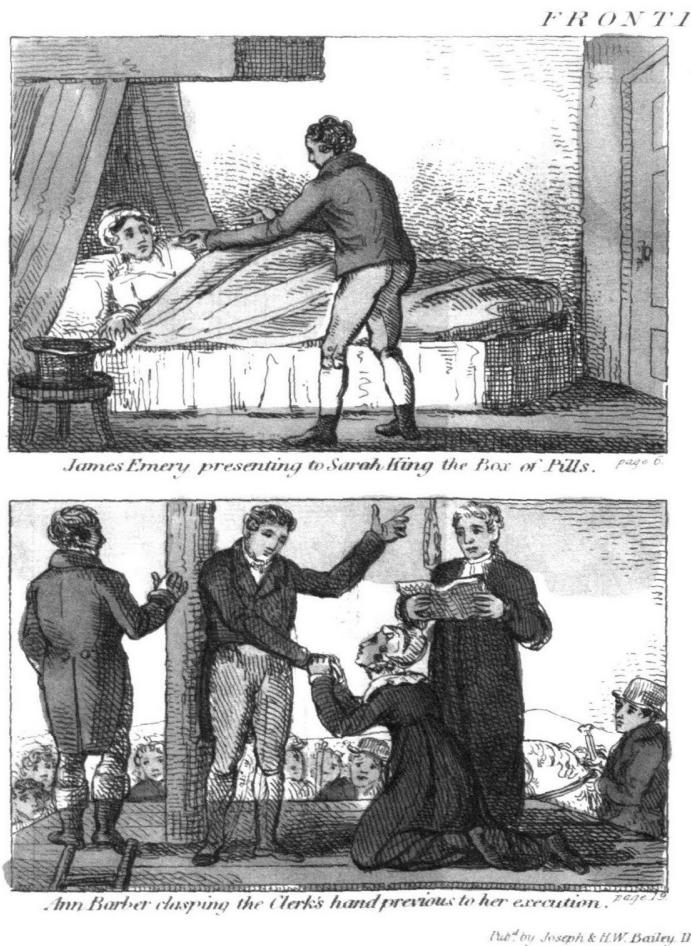


Figure 33. Two illustrations of the 'FRONTISPIECE' of *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery*.

The two accompanying illustrations reassert the depiction of poisoners as harmless or benign individuals.<sup>66</sup> The first illustration depicts Emery pretending to care for the sick woman, apparently administering medicine when, in fact, he is poisoning her. A significant detail here is that he holds the medicine in one hand, with the other open and positioned closely beside it, both hands extended forward as if inviting trust. His body language gently encourages the recipient to accept the offering. This gesture mirrors the deceit inherent in his actions—on the surface, he appears thoughtful and concerned, but in fact he delivers death. The caption under the illustration reads, 'James Emery

66. The two illustrations of the 'Frontispiece' of *Revenge against Murder, Seduction, & Adultery*, 1821.

presenting to Sarah King the bar of Pills'. '[P]resenting' evokes a sense of formality and consideration, as if he were offering a gift, reinforcing the deception. Additionally, the term 'bar of pills' implies he is giving her a legitimate and widely-used form of treatment. The illustration fails to differentiate visually between the perpetrator and the victim, as James and Sarah are drawn similarly, reinforcing the motif of familiarity and reliance inherent in the poisoning scene. This subtle ambiguity in the depiction emphasises how easily trust can be manipulated in domestic settings, particularly when the poisoner assumes the role of caregiver. This image exposes the double concealment of such crimes: first, the act of poisoning itself carried out in the private sphere and hidden from public view; second, the perpetrator's ability to mask their malicious intent under the guise of unstinting devotion until the victim's demise. Such dramatic narratives are shaped more by the motif of deceit rather than the poisoner's gender. Correspondingly, the second illustration shows Barber in a submissive posture, reinforcing the theme of duplicity by depicting poisoners as meek and vulnerable, much like in Edwards' ballad, where she feigns remorse to garner sympathy.

The second key aspect highlighted by these illustrations is the symbolic representation of the contrasting nature of the crimes versus the punishment. The Emery illustration evokes his covert and private crime, underscored by a foregrounded closed door, implying secrecy and concealment. In stark contrast, the second illustration of Ann Barber stresses the public nature of her punishment. It shows Barber on an elevated scaffold surrounded by spectators, with the head of the stairs prominently displayed to highlight the scaffold's elevation. This juxtaposition between the closed door and the public execution scaffold is revealing about societal reactions to serious crimes once exposed. The placement of these two illustrations as frontispieces, rather than embedding them within the text, appears intentional and significant. While these illustrations present both Ann Barber and James Emery—opposing genders, male and female—they collectively narrate a complete story of hidden crimes brought to light, indicating that the illustrator viewed both Ann and James

similarly, irrespective of their gender—a uniform approach to depicting crime and punishment in this context.

To validate the motif's prevalence beyond gender, we can consider 'An Account of the Life, Trial, and Behaviour of William Barnett, Who Was Executed at Leicester for the Wilful Murder of His Wife' broadside in 1821 at Leicester. It presents the poisoner Barnett as a seemingly gentle and unexceptional man, a tailor and 'a resident of Ulsthorpe', thereby heightening the sensational impact of his malicious actions.<sup>67</sup> The broadside details how Barnett obtained the poison, stating that he 'purchased the arsenic at a druggist shop in Leicester' under the pretence of using it 'not for himself, but for a neighbour'. This quote highlights his devious manipulation of social norms and trust; Barnett conceals his true intentions by pretending to act on behalf of another. The broadside not only indicates how Barnett 'administered the fatal dose' to his wife but uses phrasing such as 'his life lay safe at Ullesthorpe' to convey his feeling of security while evading justice for a few months after the crime.

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67. 'An Account of the Life, Trial, and Behaviour of William Barnett', broadside (1821).



Figure 34. The illustration of 'An Account of the Life, Trial, and Behaviour of William Barnett' broadside (1821).

The accompanying illustration (see Figure 34), although small and seemingly simplistic, is stark, crude and powerfully extends the thematic portrayal. It uses the unembellished interplay of black and white to dramatic effect. This design produces bold, unambiguous lines and forms, which, in this case, depict Barnett with his face drawn as an empty white oval, featureless and suspended on the scaffold. His hands and legs are neatly aligned beside him, contrasting sharply with the surrounding crowd. Although the onlookers have faces, their features are cramped and indistinguishable from one another, all rendered in solid black, and they hold what appear to be weapons or sticks. This artistic choice removes any personal identity from the spectators, thereby enhancing our sense of the execution as a collective, emotionless event. The presence of what look like cudgels in the onlookers' hands conveys the turbulent, even primitive intensity of mob justice, contrasting with the formal iconography of the scaffold. This dichotomy in the visual technique—

deliberately unvarnished versus formal—mirrors the thematic tension between the state's cold implementation of justice and the community's feral appetite for retribution. The onlookers seek to manifest their mob authority in answer to Barnett's clandestine and heinous crime. The contrast between the criminal's method of murder—stealthy, calculated, and private—and the public, ritualistic nature of his execution lends this visual representation a compelling force.

Arguably the most striking facet of this illustration is the neatness of Barnett's positioning—legs and hands aligned—echoing the clinical precision with which he committed his crime, reinforcing his ruthless nature. The way his body is arranged evokes an unsettling sense of order. It mimics the calculated way in which he administered poison, making his outwardly composed appearance an extension of the crime itself. His lack of facial features adds another layer, perhaps symbolising the deceptive nature of poisoning—where the perpetrator cannot be identified by their appearance or behaviour, as they often 'perform' as quiet, unremarkable citizens. The empty face implies the image of a universal villain—an invisible yet deeply feared criminal who blends seamlessly into society, hiding behind a mask of normality until their true nature is exposed through their deeds.

This pattern of acknowledging a poisoner's apparently respectable past before their crimes, which is evident in street literature, is also found in the press. Reports similarly frame poisoners within narratives of superficial virtue before unveiling their amoral core. For instance, while many articles on Ann Barber emphasised her positive image as a decent woman with two children and a happy marriage before her affair with Thompson, such acknowledgement for Shuttleworth appeared only in the chapbooks, not the newspaper coverage. An article published in two contemporary newspapers described Ann Barber as '[t]his unhappy woman', with 'the appearance of having been a sober, grave, thoughtful, and most industrious person. She was merely clad and looked considerably

older than the calendar represents her'.<sup>68</sup> Here, describing Ann as sober, mature and modest-looking encourages the perception of her as a fallen woman who had conformed to socially agreed codes and then suffered a moral failure. Questioning such a hypothesis reveals that this representation is more complex than a simple recognition of past good deeds; rather, it is a revelation of cruelty behind the decorum, which aligns her with the poisoners: underhand, disloyal and perfidious. Thus, the article hints that her fall was not due to the circumstances but rather an unveiling of a frightening reality. In this regard, the account of her premature ageing and plain dress, instead of provoking sympathy, implies that respectable garb masked an inner corruption, echoing cultural anxieties about poison and those who administer it. Similarly, an article published in the *London Chronicle* (August 15<sup>th</sup> 1821), reported that James Emery, a man accused of poisoning his lover Sarah King by giving her pills to abort her pregnancy, which resulted in her death the same year as the Barber case, was as 'a well-looking man, about twenty-five years of age, a labourer in the employment of a gentleman in the adjoining parish to White Nulby'.<sup>69</sup> By highlighting his physical traits, the article evokes a sense of surprise or incongruity between his outward appearance and the gravity of his crime. This treatment echoes the one Ann Barber received, where outward respectability or attractiveness contrasted with the malign, hidden intentions behind their deeds.

While this section has demonstrated an alignment between the press and street literature in their tendency to frame poisoning within a broader archetype rather than as an explicitly gendered crime,

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68. 'York Assizes. Petty Treason and Murder', *New Times* (London), 18 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002357/18210815/022/0004>; 'Crown Side. —Petty Treason and Murder', *Leicester Chronicle* (Leicester, England), 18 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 3 April 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000172/18210818/013/0004>.

69. 'Crown Side. Petty Treason and Murder', *London Chronicle* (London), 15 August 1821, *The Newspaper British Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002634/18210815/006/0003>.

the following section shifts focus to explore divergences in how each narrative medium addresses medical jurisprudence.

### 3.2 Depiction of Medical Jurisprudence

The judicial application of the criterion of ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, combined with the often invisible signs of poisoning, meant that medical jurisprudence became a pivotal field in shaping narratives of guilt and innocence.<sup>70</sup> However, while medical jurisprudence was established in the late eighteenth century,<sup>71</sup> Robert Christison, a professor of medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1851, lamented the inadequacies of medical testing in the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> He described the field as being ‘confined in my own profession to a few studious amateurs’ instead of experts.<sup>73</sup> He added that the quality of medical evidence presented in court was ‘loose and inconclusive, or rash and contradictory, limited in its range’, and also ‘held in low esteem’.<sup>74</sup> He claimed that it was not until the pivotal 1827 case involving Mrs Smith that a turning point occurred, where contemporary toxicology was effectively used to establish evidence of poisoning, demonstrating the discipline’s scientific rigour in legal

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70. R. G. Bloemberg, ‘The Development of the “Modern” Criminal Law of Evidence in English Law and in France, Germany and the Netherlands: 1750–1900’, *American Journal of Legal History* 59, no. 3 (2019): 358, accessed 1 February 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajlh/njz014>.

71. Rachel E Bennett, *Capital Punishment and the Criminal Corpse in Scotland, 1740–1834*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 179.

72. Robert Christison, ‘On the Present State of Medical Evidence: A Lecture Delivered before the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, on 10th March 1851’, *Monthly Journal of Medical Science* 4, n. 23: 401, National Library of Medicine, accessed 28 April 2024, <https://go.exlibris.link/wyTkwFkN>.

73. Christison, ‘On the Present State of Medical Evidence’, 401.

74. Christison, ‘On the Present State of Medical Evidence’, 401.

proceedings.<sup>75</sup> While advancements in medical jurisprudence and toxicology throughout the first half of the nineteenth century highlighted the challenges in detecting and prosecuting poisoning cases, it was not until mid-century that these concerns translated into decisive legislative action. This period saw the introduction of the Arsenic Act of 1851, which mandated meticulous record-keeping of arsenic sales, signifying the beginning of more stringent poison control measures.<sup>76</sup> This Act was followed by the Pharmacy Act of 1852, which created a register of qualified pharmaceutical chemists, and the Pharmacy Act of 1868, which established a comprehensive register of individuals authorised to sell, dispense, and compound poisons.<sup>77</sup> Whorton contends that it was not until the Pharmacy Act of 1868 that pivotal changes were realised.<sup>78</sup> These limitations, along with the affordability of poison, the rise in domestic discord, and the financial incentives among the lower classes, all contributed to poisoning reaching 'epidemic' levels, triggering widespread panic, as well as heightened uncertainty surrounding poisoning cases, as mentioned earlier in the chapter.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, contemporary print narratives surrounding poisoning murders adopted various strategies to address these anxieties—affirming the credibility of medical testing, in contrast to cases of overt violence where forensic evidence was often marginalised and emphasising alleged confessions to reinforce certainty in the absence of conclusive proof. This section explores how street literature's

75. Christison, 'On the Present State of Medical Evidence', 401.

76. 'History of the Society', *The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain*, accessed 8 March 2024, <https://www.rpharms.com/about-us/history-of-the-society#:~:text=1852%20Pharmacy%20Act%2C%20June%2030th,had%20taken%20the%20Society's%20exams>.

77. 'History of the Society', *The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain*, accessed 8 March 2024, <https://www.rpharms.com/about-us/history-of-the-society#:~:text=1852%20Pharmacy%20Act%2C%20June%2030th,had%20taken%20the%20Society's%20exams>.

78. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 135.

79. Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 32.

rendering of the trial and execution of poisoners transformed the use of medical jurisprudence into multifaceted literary (verbal-visual) events rather than mere salacious whodunits. As the section will reveal, street literature often adopted a more sceptical stance than the press, subtly probing authoritative narratives.

Street literature in poison cases foregrounded medical testimony to striking effect, as in the broadside, 'A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber'. It reported that John Hindle, the surgeon, when examining the deceased body, 'opened it, and was enabled clearly to ascertain the cause of his death'.<sup>80</sup> By presenting John Hindle, the surgeon, as someone who 'clearly' determined the cause of death, the text reinforces the reliability of his findings despite the limited forensic methods of the time. The phrasing here evokes a sense of objective, even infallible expertise—only a sharp-eyed and dedicated professional could uncover the truth behind an invisible crime like poisoning. Comparably, *The Trial of Ann Barber* chapbook stated that the 'medical man who opened the body would fully prove that the deceased had died by poison taken in his stomach, and the evidence which would be laid before them, would leave no doubt that the poison had been administered by the prisoner at the bar'.<sup>81</sup> Hyperbolic terms like 'fully prove', 'leave no doubt' constructs an air of absolute authority and validity around medical testimony. However, poison detection in 1821 was rudimentary at best, and the definitive tests for arsenic had yet to be developed. Nevertheless, in the newspaper article 'York Assizes: Friday, August 10. Petit Treason and Murder' published in the *Durham County Advertiser* (August 18<sup>th</sup> 1821), the contributor described the doctor John Hindle's examination of the body with a similar confidence: '[h]e opened it, and was enabled clearly to ascertain the cause of his death' and '[h]e attributed the immediate cause of

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80. 'A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber', broadside (1821).

81. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16-17.

Barber's death to mineral poison', and further notes that he 'took mineral poison (white arsenic) from the coats of the stomach'.<sup>82</sup> These specific chemical terms, coupled with the detailed observations—'the stomach was in a very putrid state; the coats of it much corroded and inflamed'—solidifies his conclusions. Hindle's assertion that 'the external appearances he saw could not be produced by other causes, distinct from mineral poisons, in so aggravated a degree', along with his final confirmation that 'the appearances taken together, convinced him the deceased must have died of mineral poison', underscores the narrative's intent to depict the diagnosis as thorough and incontrovertible.<sup>83</sup> At first glance then, it appears that the popular press and street literature sought to bolster the precision and certainty in medical testing for poisoning where none truly existed, as evidenced by the repetition of not only similar phrasing but even identical sentences. The doctor's testimony from the chapbook also appeared in newspapers like *The British Mercury* and *The London Moderator* on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1821. However, the presence of the same ideas and locutions in both mediums does not imply that they share the same stance, as a closer examination of each will reveal.<sup>84</sup>

In *The Trial of Ann Barber*, immediately following the above-mentioned doctor's testimony, is the statement: '[s]everal witnesses were called, who proved the facts as stated by the counsel for the prosecution'.<sup>85</sup> This merely acknowledges the presence of additional witnesses without providing any

82. 'York Assizes: Friday, August 10. Petit Treason and Murder', *Durham County Advertiser* (Durham, England), 18 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 3 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000612/18210818/029/0004>.

83. 'York Assizes: Friday, August 10. Petit Treason and Murder', *Durham County Advertiser*, 18 August 1821.

84. 'Petty Treason and Murder', *The British Mercury* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002772/18210815/029/0008>; and 'Petty Treason and Murder', *The London Moderator* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002761/18210815/030/0008>.

85. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16.

specifics of their testimonies, essentially glossing over their contributions. The omission may have been to avoid redundant information; yet mentioning additional witnesses without providing details suggests that it was an intentional choice—signalling to readers that this decision was purposeful rather than incidental. A more straightforward interpretation emerges when comparing the additional testimonies included after the vague statement in the chapbook with those in the newspaper reports: while both acknowledged the doctor's medical testimony, the selection of other testimonies differed between the two mediums. Following the vague statement, the chapbook includes the testimony of Mr. Jones, who objected to the verdict of petty treason, arguing that the marriage between the Barbers was not fully proven. Mr. Jones then took an objection to the indictment, one of the counts of which charged petty treason, on the ground that the marriage was not proved in the strictest form'. However, this objection was promptly 'overruled'.<sup>86</sup> Then this was followed by a sudden and brief appearance of the prisoner herself announcing, 'I am innocent, Sir, and I leave it to God and my conscience'.<sup>87</sup> This was followed by another indication of an additional omission: 'Mr. Christopher Jervison —I am one of the Coroners for this county. George Wordsworth, younger, was examined before me. This paper (shown) contains the very words, and all the words of his evidence. The deposition was put in and read'.<sup>88</sup> Given that Jervison needed to confirm the testimony and emphasised that Wordsworth's 'very words, and all the words of his evidence' were in the document, one would expect to see Wordsworth's statement directly following this introduction. However, Wordsworth's evidence was not included in the chapbook; it may have been omitted alongside other witness accounts, which the chapbook notably highlights as absent. To

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86. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16.

87. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16.

88. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16.

fully understand the chapbook's perspective on the case and to discern the implications of what was omitted versus what was retained, locating Wordsworth's testimony in other sources becomes necessary. In the *London Chronicle* (August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1821), Wordsworth, the deputy constable of Rothwell, offers a portrayal of Ann Barber that suggests an indirect admission of guilt. In his testimony, he clarifies that initially, Barber denied ever visiting Mr Reinhardt's drug shop but later acknowledged standing on the steps, raising suspicion through her contradiction. He also reported overhearing an incriminating conversation involving Mrs Barber, in which a postman insinuated that her husband might be aware of the affair and could punish her for it. In response, she made an apparent threat—'I'll take care he does not'—and later attempted to deflect blame, saying, 'It is all owing to that devil that I have done what I have done'. Wordsworth's account underscores Barber's tendencies toward partial admission, denial, and deflection—traits that would likely reinforce suspicions of her culpability.<sup>89</sup> Then, the chapbook proceeds to a statement given by John Smirthwaite (the prisoner's brother), which opens a new aspect of the case, the possibility of James's suicide:

John Smirthwaite.—I am brother to the prisoner. I live at Rhodes-green, about 60 yards from the deceased's house. They were making a great noise at the house of the deceased, and blowing trumpets. I sent for James into my house, and asked him if there was any difference between him and his wife? He said there was not; only the neighbours called him cuckold, so that it unhinged his mind; he had some thoughts as he came home to jump into a pit. I said by no means to destroy himself. He said he would by some means or other. He did not seem any way more than usual in his spirits. I know that he was poorly; I was with him on Friday night before he died. He said he had a fall from a cart. I don't know how long before.

By Mr. Hardy.—I heard on Sunday that he died by poison. I did not go to the Coroner to tell what Barber had said about destroying himself by poison, or otherwise. I don't know to whom I mentioned it. I kept it in my memory. I'd rather swear no further.<sup>90</sup>

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89. 'Crown Side. Petty Treason and Murder', *London Chronicle* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002634/18210815/006/0003>.

90. *Trial of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 16.

Here Smirthwaite's testimony paints a picture of a man in emotional and physical decline, possibly predisposed to self-harm. Additionally, Smirthwaite's hesitation fully to disclose this information—‘I'd rather swear no further’—suggests a reluctance to undermine the prosecution's case. Mr Hardy's questioning reveals that Smirthwaite did not report James's suicidal remarks to the Coroner, instead choosing to ‘keep it in [his] memory’, which raises further doubts about the thoroughness of the investigation. The writer's effort to highlight these omissions suggests a deliberate choice to make readers aware of what is left unsaid, with each omission and inclusion carefully shaping the narrative. The preserved testimonies—such as Mr Jones's objection to the indictment, which subtly questions the legal basis of the charge, Ann Barber's single-sentence plea of innocence, and her brother's remarks suggesting the possibility of suicide—create doubt surrounding her guilt. However, the brother's testimony highlights the familial relationship with Ann Barber and raises concerns of possible perjury. It seems the chapbook's author wants the reader to find loopholes in every narrative component, thereby opening a space for rival interpretations.

A similar strategy is found in *The Trial and Execution of James Emery* chapbook, where, in a striking departure from prosecutorial convention, Mr. Knox laid out the case against the defendant and acknowledged a potential alternative explanation for the defendant's actions. He posited, ‘it was possible that the prisoner, at the time he administered it, had not any intention of destroying her life, but of procuring her the miscarriage of a child of which he was the father’.<sup>91</sup>

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91. *Trial and Execution of James Emery*, chapbook (1821), 3-4.

Mr. Knox (with whom was Mr. Broderick) stated the case for the prosecution. It was his painful duty to lay before them the melancholy particulars of this most serious charge; but before he proceeded to detail the facts, it was necessary that he should, under the correction of the Learned Judge, state the law of murder, as applicable to the present case, because, although from the nature of the drug administered to the deceased her death was the necessary consequence, yet it was possible that the prisoner, at the time he administered it *had not any intention of destroying her life, but of procuring her the miscarriage of a child of which he was the father.* Some exposition of the law therefore in such a case became requisite. It was not necessary, in order to constitute the crime of murder, in law, that there should be *an intention to destroy the deceased at the time the deadly*

Figure 35. Part of pages 3 and 4 of *Trial and Execution of James Emery* chapbook.

Notably, the text turns to italics starting from 'had not any intention of destroying her life' through 'father', underscoring this alternative motive (see Figure 35). This typographical choice invites readers to engage more critically with the narrative, encouraging them to consider various interpretations of the case beyond merely proving murder. Such a tactic suggests that even if confessions or medical evidence establish death by poison, they do not necessarily provide conclusive insight into what truly happened.

This approach, which casts doubt on Ann's guilt, taps into contemporary fears of wrongful accusation of poisoning and offers a nuanced critique of the entire judicial process, highlighting the precarious balance between guilt and innocence in public perception. 'The Last Effect of the Poison Panic', published in the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* (December 6th, 1862), claimed that:

A case of suspected poisoning has lately been made the subject of public investigation, which demands the serious consideration of the medical profession. We have no hesitation in saying that if such inquiries, based, as this one was, on no tangible evidence, founded on assumptions directly in contravention to the canons of scientific experience, be permitted and encouraged, no person is safe. Sooner or later the evil will recoil on the medical profession itself, and we shall have the spectacle of medical men dragged through the disgrace and degradation of public

suspicion and obloquy. It is a duty we owe to our readers to recount the facts, and we, therefore, set ourselves to the disagreeable task.<sup>92</sup>

This extract reveals another facet of the nineteenth-century poisoning panic: the possibility of being falsely accused. The author conveys through phrases like ‘no person is safe’ and ‘disgrace and degradation’ that normalising investigations based on mere ‘assumptions’ jeopardise the well-being of individuals wrongfully accused. It also erodes public confidence in medical expertise and undermines the so-called ‘objective’ principles governing it, ultimately fostering a climate of suspicion that is detrimental to social order. Similarly, an article published in *The Spectator* (January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1856), echoed the same ideas: ‘A. FAILURE of justice does not consist only in the escape of “the guilty”; its worst part is the failure of a defence for the innocent’.<sup>93</sup>

On the other hand, the popular press often foregrounded medical testimonies as a means of reinforcing guilt. By presenting detailed accounts of tests and expert opinions, contemporary newspapers framed poisoning cases as solvable mysteries, relying on scientific progress to deliver justice. However, this emphasis on medical evidence is not mirrored in cases of overt violence, where newspapers often disregarded medical testimony. This discrepancy can be attributed to the visual immediacy and apparent straightforwardness of these acts, which were presumed to require less scientific validation in the public eye than the hidden complexities of poisoning. This historical perspective mirrors the modern ‘CSI effect’, as described by Elizabeth Harvey and Linda Derksen, who claim that there is ‘a belief in the near-infallibility of forensic science and its ability to solve all

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92. ‘The Last Effect of the Poison Panic’, *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* (Wiltshire, England), 6 December 1862, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 11 October 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000361/18621206/122/0007>.

93. ‘The Poison Cases’, *The Spectator* (London), 12 January 12, 1856, 13, *The Spectator Archive*, accessed 11 October 2024, <https://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/12th-january-1856/13/the-poison-cases>.

crime'.<sup>94</sup> Just as contemporary audiences may overestimate the capabilities of forensic science due to widespread media portrayals, nineteenth-century readers seemed similarly influenced by the press's depiction of forensic advancements in solving crimes. Several nineteenth-century articles included numerous medical testimonies regarding the presence of arsenic in the deceased's body, with detailed descriptions of the victims provided by doctors who performed the autopsy and by bystanders who saw the bodies. In the 'Crown Side. Petty Treason and Murder', published in the *London Chronicle* (August 15th, 1821), the deceased's body was portrayed by one of the witnesses, Sara Parker, who was called to the scene by Jane Smithwaite on March 17<sup>th</sup>:

I looked at him; he neither moved nor breathed. I felt for his pulse; he had none. I stayed a little time, and went out. At 11 o'clock I assisted in laying him out. When we bared his body, it was very black, and there was stuff running out of his mouth. His ears were very black. I was very much surprised.<sup>95</sup>

This extract vividly illustrates the immediate reactions and assumptions made by laypeople at the scene of a suspected poisoning. Parker's observations not only evoke a strong visual impression but also set the stage for public speculation and concern, even before any formal medical examination could take place. This dramatic description in newspaper coverage reflects an intrigue in playing detective and building a case against the ambiguity of poisoning, priming readers to accept more 'authoritative' conclusions. Such speculation by the witness makes it seem as though poisoning was easy to detect by commoners, which is far from the reality of poison as a silent killer.

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94. Elizabeth Harvey and Linda Derksen, 'Science Fiction or Social Life?: An Exploratory Content Analysis of Popular Press Reports on the CSI Effect', in *The CSI Effect: Television, Crime, and Governance*, ed. Michele Byers and Val Marie Johnson (United States: Lexington Books, 2009), 3.

95. 'Crown Side. Petty Treason and Murder', *London Chronicle* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002634/18210815/006/0003>.

The other chapbook, *A Particular Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber, who was executed at York on Monday the 18th August, 1821*,<sup>96</sup> offers a distinct narrative approach by omitting any form of medical evidence or physical description of James Barber, the deceased. This absence of scientific detail shifts the focus away from ‘objective’ proof, relying instead on circumstantial evidence to build the case against Ann Barber. One of the key pieces of such evidence is that ‘[t]he prisoner was proved to have bought a penny worth of arsenic at a druggist’s shop, in Wakefield, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March last, which, according to her own confession, she administered to him, in a quantity of warm sweetened ale, in consequence of which he died in the course of few hours’.<sup>97</sup> This passage crafts a narrative of Ann Barber’s guilt with language that exudes authority, leaving little room for doubt, yet notably, this time, it does so without relying on corroborating medical observation. Instead, the text builds its case through circumstantial details and Barber’s admissions of guilt. That Barber purchased ‘a penny worth of arsenic at a druggist’s shop’, grounds the story in a tangible reality, with the trivial cost of the poison underscoring the ease with which this deadly substance could be obtained. Her ‘own confession’ further solidifies the narrative of her guilt. The structured cause-and-effect phrasing, ‘in consequence of which he died’, draws a direct line between her actions and his death, reinforcing her responsibility. The description of the poison administered in ‘warm sweetened ale’ juxtaposes a familiar, comforting drink with the deadly poison it contains. The immediacy of ‘in the course of a few hours’ emphasises the swift effect of arsenic, heightening the horror of the crime. This artful deployment of textual detail effectively paints Barber as both calculating and culpable, framing her guilt in sensory, moral, and factual terms, ensuring that the reader perceives her as morally reprehensible. Moreover, the chapbook accentuates Ann Barber’s guilt by incorporating

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96. *A Particular Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821).

97. *A particular account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 2.

repeated admissions—either through outright confessions or subtly implied in her prayers for forgiveness. Each of the four pages features some form of acknowledgement of wrongdoing. This repetition of guilt-related language replaces the role of physical or medical evidence with a psychological portrait of a remorseful sinner. The chapbook's portrayal of Ann Barber's final words is telling:

As the hurdle came to the threshold, so that she could see the platform, she bitterly exclaimed—‘O Lord God, that I should come to this.’ During the few moments that intervened till she reached the last fatal spot, she kept incoherently crying out—‘O Lord, save me’—‘O God, help me’—‘O Lord, preserve my soul.’ When the last services of religion begun, she looked frantic and wild, dropt on her knees, and with fearful violence clasped the clerk’s hands, and caught up part of the words of devotion that reached her ears. The prevailing expressions were—‘O Lord Jesus, save my soul’—‘O God, deliver my soul this day to Heaven’—‘O Lord, I forgive my enemies’—‘O God bless my bairns.’<sup>98</sup>

As she approaches this ‘last fatal spot’, her exclamations are captured with raw immediacy, while the reader becomes both onlooker and theatregoer in this bizarre spectacle. Her ‘stagey’ utterance, steeped in religious and existential desperation, shifts the focus from concrete evidence of her guilt to a more nebulous, morally charged atmosphere. Her frantic and wild demeanour is vividly rendered (‘fearful violence’), while the use of regional vernacular—‘O God bless my bairns’—anchors her despair in a specific cultural/geographical context. By framing Barber as guilty through her emotionally charged words and gestures, the chapbook constructs a narrative where moral guilt supplants empirical proof.

Regarding visual representation, poisoning broadsides and chapbooks do not appear to include illustrations of medical evidence. However, several broadsides render executed poisoners with their hands clasped to their chests, a gesture that frequently symbolises repentance and confession (see Figure 36).

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98. *A particular account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber*, chapbook (1821), 4-5.



Figure 36. These illustrations are taken from three different broadsides.

These illustrations are taken from three broadsides depicting poisoners' executions: Thomas Howard, Ann Barber and John Jardine.<sup>99</sup> The publishers use these illustrations to evoke a confessional tone, stressing the convicted poisoners' guilt. While some may argue that the Ann Barber broadside incorrectly shows three men being executed instead of a woman, it is true that

99. See Figure 36 (from top): 'The Last Dying Speech and Confession of Thomas Howard, a Young Man Aged 21, Who Was Executed in November Last in Somersetshire, for the Horrid Crime of Murdering Elizabeth Taylor, a Young Woman, of Respectable Connections, Whom He Had Seduced Under Promise of Marriage: But Having Become Afterwards Enamoured of an Heiress of Considerable Fortune, Whom It Was His Intention to Marry – He Resolved to Perpetrate the Crime for Which He So Justly Suffered', broadside (North Shields: Pollock), *John Johnson Collection: An Archive of Printed Ephemera – Crime*, accessed 3 February 2025, ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/pamphlets-ephemeral-works/last-dying-speech-confession-thomas-howard-young/docview/2823555333/se-2>; 'A Brief Account of the Trial and Execution of Ann Barber', broadside (1821); 'Particulars of the Trials and Execution of John Jardine', broadside (1829).

some of the broadsides utilise pre-printed woodcut illustrations.<sup>100</sup> However, the fact that the publisher/printer ensures explicitly that the three men have their hands on their chests appears to prioritise conveying a specific symbolic meaning over accurately representing the number of executed individuals and their gender. This gesture is also found in the previously discussed illustration in 'Eight Persons Murdered!' broadside, which shows Margert Joyer clasping her hand to her chest and lowering her head and in 'Trial, Sentence, Confession, and Execution of John Thompson on Saturday, August 21st, 1847, for the Murder of His Wife'.<sup>101</sup>

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100. David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Street Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century: Producers, Sellers, Consumers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 2, accessed 10 February 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=5061824>.

101. See (Figure 37): 'Eight Persons Murdered!', broadside (between 1836 and 1841); and 'Trial, Sentence, Confession, and Execution of John Thompson on Saturday, August 21st, 1847, for the Murder of His Wife', broadside, *Broadside Ballads Online*, Bodleian Libraries, accessed 26 February 2024, <https://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.



Figure 37. From the top, the illustration of 'Eight Persons Murdered!' and 'Trial, Sentence, Confession, and Execution of John Thompson on Saturday, August 21st, 1847, for the Murder of His Wife' broadsides.

Therefore, the hand-over-chest motif in the illustrations, as opposed to the naturally lifeless hand that should hang beside the body in real life, serves as a deliberate narrative device designed to confirm the poisoners' guilt regardless of their gender.

A parallel pattern is observed in the press coverage of poison cases, where reliance on confessions became a pivotal tool in establishing culpability, as shown by the contrasting treatments of Margaret Shuttleworth and Ann Barber. In 'At York Assizes' published in the *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* on August 17, 1821, Ann was asked 'whether she knew any reason why execution of the

sentence should be delayed, and answered in the negative'.<sup>102</sup> 'Execution of Ann Barber' published in the *Statesman* (London) on August 15, 1821, reported that '[s]he frequently confessed to having committed the horrid crime, and as often denied it. At last, however, she acknowledged having poisoned her husband and said that she had attempted to do it once before'.<sup>103</sup> In 'Yorkshire Assizes, August 4, 1821, and The Execution' published in *Leeds Mercury* (Leeds, England) on August 18, 1821, there are two parts: one discusses the trial, and the other describes the execution scene and how she confessed to the reverend before her execution.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, the *General Evening Post* (August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1821), reported that James Cawthorne did the same thing: 'To the Minister he made a full confession of his guilt, and said "he deserved more than he should suffer"'.<sup>105</sup> However, this reliance on confessions as critical evidence in newspaper articles is complicated by cases like that of Margaret Shuttleworth. While newspapers remained relatively silent about Shuttleworth's consistent claims of innocence, street literature featured them prominently, leading to petitions and a respite of one month. In contrast, Ann Barber's supposed confessions were exaggerated in the press, despite historian Wade's assertion that Barber was tried based on an 'alleged confession' she supposedly made to a constable—a disputed point.<sup>106</sup> This exaggeration suggests that the portrayal of

102. 'At York Assizes', *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* (Cambridge, England), 17 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*. Accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000420/18210817/005/0002>.

103. 'Execution of Ann Barber', *Statesman* (London), 15 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002647/18210815/011/0003>.

104. 'Yorkshire Assizes, Aug 4. and The Execution', *Leeds Mercury* (Leeds, England), 18 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 3 April 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000076/18210818/009/0003>.

105. *General Evening Post* (London), 18 August 1821, *The British Newspaper Archive*, accessed 16 May 2024, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002593/18210818/017/0004>.

106. Wade, *Yorkshire's Murderous Women*, 50

confessions in press coverage of poisoning may have been shaped more by the narrative needs than by the actual availability or reliability of such confessions.

While street literature and the press offered different perspectives on the Ann Barber case—the chapbook discussed the possibility of suicide by poison, while the press overemphasised the certainty of medical science—neither medium outright questioned the reliability of poisoning tests, even though such procedures were still rudimentary and often inconclusive. It seems that unlike overt acts of violence, where the crime was visible and medical testimony played a more peripheral role, poisoning cases relied heavily on expert interpretation, fostering a sense of scientific intrigue in cases where the crime was concealed and challenging to detect. Sensational street literature further amplified these narratives, dramatising the gradual revelation of hidden crimes through medical testimony and forensic evidence, as evident in ‘Comittal of J. S. Wooler for the Poisoning of His Wife at Darlington’ broadside.<sup>107</sup> These accounts may have influenced the emerging detective novel genre, as both forms share a central focus on uncovering concealed truths.<sup>108</sup> Kathryn Montgomery Hunter’s argument in *Doctors’ Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (1991) provides a valuable framework for addressing this connection. She notes that the ‘medical case, the central narrative account of the study and diagnosis of disease in an individual patient, developed along with that most modern of Western literary forms, the detective story. The ratiocination of Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin in the 1830s was shared by the early pathological anatomists’.<sup>109</sup> While Hunter draws

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107. See ‘Comittal of J. S. Wooler for the Poisoning of His Wife at Darlington’ broadside, *Broadside Ballad Online*, Bodleian Libraries, accessed 26 February 2024, <https://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

108. Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), accessed 5 February 2025, <https://go.exlibris.link/t64BT8l0>.

109. Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors’ Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 21.

attention to the links between medical reasoning and detective fiction, these connections also extend to street literature's coverage of poison trials.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the association between poisoning and femininity in nineteenth-century Britain was shaped as much by literary conventions as by legal realities. Closer scrutiny reveals that street literature's verbal and visual portrayals of poisoning cases captivated audiences, drawing the eye to panels filled with layered, scrambled messages about verisimilitude, institutional authority and justice. The panel illustrations and verbal ploys in such works operate together to create narratives that both confound and enthrall. These pieces are cultural curios and puzzle pieces, inviting us to decode the significance of line, shading, and stylisation. At the same time, the verbal text reveals complex rhetorical strategies that make possible rival interpretations. What emerges is a rich interplay between image and language that oscillates between the desire for narrative closure and the enduring appeal of mystery and ambiguous motivation.

## Conclusion

Street literature is, therefore, worth a closer scrutiny than it has yet received.

—Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide from the Beginning of Printing to the Year 1897* (London: Woburn Press, 1977), 142.

This project is guided by the primary research question: how does the complex interplay between visual and verbal texts in street literature—particularly broadsides, ballads and chapbooks—represent and reframe real-life cases of IPH in relation to contemporary, often gendered anxieties, assumptions, and practices? What becomes apparent from even a cursory survey of street literature is how, through patterns of text-image interaction, these artefacts confront and process acute public misgivings about a nation that was far from being in ‘the foremost files of time’, as Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’ (1842) famously describes it.<sup>1</sup> Broadsides and chapbooks reflect the physical brutality of nineteenth-century British domesticity in a raw, direct, and lucid way. As Gatrell asserts, ‘what drew the purchasers, then, was more likely the fact that execution sheets were totemic artefacts. They were symbolic substitutes for the experiences signified or the experiences watched’.<sup>2</sup> Gatrell’s research encourages us to view these ‘sheets’ as a counter-discourse to a more polite literary register, transforming acts of state violence, typically enacted by ‘powerful, remote, and broadly unintelligible agencies’, into something visible and graspable by a labouring-class readership.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, to situate these depictions within a broader literary field, this thesis recognises

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1. Alfred Tennyson, ‘Locksley Hall’, in *Poems* (London: Moxon, 1842), 75. For a detailed discussion on the interaction between text and image in meaning-making, see Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790–1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); James A. Knapp, *Illustrating the Past in Early Modern England: The Representation of History in Printed Books* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 38–40.

2. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, 175.

3. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, 175.

that different publication ecologies mattered. Volume fiction and serial instalments were governed by distinct codes of propriety, market expectations and editorial gatekeeping; these could restrain explicitness, but they also fostered powerful forms of suggestion, inference and allusion.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842), the Duke's calm reference to having his wife's smile 'stopped' hints at femicide without depicting it directly.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) explores themes of spousal violence and female entrapment, which are mediated through melodramatic tropes and Gothic misdirection rather than overt brutality.<sup>6</sup> Widely taught, canonical literature tends to contain depictions of spousal abuse or murder within moral or social propriety. In George Eliot's *Janet's Repentance* (1857), Janet's domestic suffering—inflicted by her abusive husband, Mr Dempster—is acknowledged, but the narrative avoids detailed or sensational accounts of the mistreatment. Similarly, Dickens is an important test case. The murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) remains one of the era's most harrowing scenes in mainstream fiction: the blows are described with unsettling physicality, and the chapter lingers on Nancy's attempts to defend herself.<sup>7</sup> Yet the novel's framing also matters. By situating the crime within the criminal underworld, aligning Sikes's violence with his habitual brutality (towards Bull's-

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4. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

5. Robert Browning, 'My Last Duchess. Ferrara', in *Complete Works of Robert Browning: Dramatic Lyrics. Dramatic Romances. Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1898), 143–145, originally published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), line 46. Google Books, accessed 16 May 2025. [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Complete\\_Works\\_of\\_Robert\\_Browning\\_Dramat/39m\\_vX60zx8C?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Complete_Works_of_Robert_Browning_Dramat/39m_vX60zx8C?hl=en&gbpv=1).

6. For sensation fiction's preoccupation with spousal murder and domestic crime, see Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875); Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt; or Jealousy* (1866); Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and *St Martin's Eve* (1866); Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1864).

7. Sue Zemka, 'The Death of Nancy "Sikes", 1838–1912', *Representations* 110, no. 1 (2010): 29–57, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2010.110.1.29>.

eye as much as to people), and denying the couple marriage, Dickens protects the imagined respectability of the middle-class home even as he shocks readers. Also, in *Great Expectations* (1861), Mrs Joe's abusive behaviour toward her husband is shaped by the archetype of the cruel stepmother to Pip. It is presented with a mix of sly humour and exaggeration (e.g., the Tickler), which distances the reader from framing it as IPV.

Taken together, these different narrative strategies underscore that representations of domestic violence in Victorian print culture ranged from allusive to explicit. In this sense, street literature occupies a pivotal position in this continuum: neither wholly separate from nor subordinate to canonical literature, but rather a precursor to the affective and aesthetic strategies of the Newgate and later sensation novels. Street literature's blunt visuality and vernacular immediacy anticipate the sensationalism that would later dominate popular fiction. Its sensationalism is not incidental but constitutive: both an aesthetic mode and a commercial ploy embedded in its very form. Through eye-catching typography, striking woodcut illustrations, and a hybrid mix of balladry, prose, and moral exhortation, street literature creates emotionally charged and visually immediate accounts that do not just delineate violence—they perform it. These narratives exploit popular idioms to make private suffering hyper-visible, transforming domestic trauma into a public spectacle.

In this context, Rita Felski's analysis of shock is relevant here: 'shock invades consciousness and breaches the reader's or viewer's defences. Smashing into the psyche like a blunt instrument, it can wreak havoc on our usual ways of ordering and understanding the world'.<sup>8</sup> She defines 'shock' as building 'on a sense of fear, serving as a synonym for terror or intense fright, while also shading towards rather different associations of disgust and repulsion'.<sup>9</sup> Felski's argument throws into bolder

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8. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 113.

9. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 112.

relief the myriad street literature portrayals of the IPH cases we have seen in the thesis. For example, these depictions foreground visceral spectacle and affective excess, raising questions about audience shock, disgust, and identification. In this sense, the broadsides and chapbooks' manipulation of affect mirrors the unsettling dynamics later associated with the Newgate novel and sensation fiction, in which moral judgement and emotional response become entangled. As Patrick Brantlinger notes, the sensation novel was 'a source of immediate excitement', appealing to the reader's nerves rather than to moral judgement, while Lynn Pykett identifies a similar 'moral ambivalence and unwholesome fascination with crime' in contemporary debates surrounding the Newgate novel.<sup>10</sup> Felski's framework thus illuminates how nineteenth-century print culture blurred the boundaries between moral instruction and voyeuristic pleasure—a tension that future research might explore across other media and genres.

Beyond their affective charge, these narratives also dismantle bourgeois fantasies of the home as a haven and exposes the precarious realities of gendered labour, abject poverty, and familial oppression. This heightened mode of representation renders such texts uniquely well-suited to staging deep unease about what happens to women behind closed doors—particularly how the harsh gender expectations imposed upon labouring-class women can trigger savage violence. Far from emerging in isolation, street literature is shaped by and responsive to its broader social and historical contexts, which continue to inform how we read and understand it today. By placing English and Scottish examples side by side, this study has highlighted significant regional differences in circulation patterns, moral messaging, religious inflexions and attitudes to capital punishment. The Scottish primary sources remind scholars that the landscape of popular print culture extended well

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10. Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 1 (1982): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044667>; Lynn Pykett, 'The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830–1868', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26.

beyond London, shaped by local concerns and community-specific forms of address. Street literature's decentralised and adaptable nature challenges the metropolitan assumptions that dominate much of Victorian literary historiography.

Finally, this project is designed to resonate with book historians and media archaeologists. The fragile, cheaply produced sheets associated with street literature—often printed on reused woodblocks and recycled paper—offer vital insights into the evolving technologies, economies, and unofficial networking clusters that underpinned its circulation. The disregard shown by authors and performers for copyright conventions, their works' visual continuity through recycled imagery, and the regional dissemination routes all contribute to a richer understanding of nineteenth-century print culture as a materially and socially textured phenomenon. These are not just texts but cultural artefacts, and their physical qualities warrant further investigation.

The archetypes these texts evoke—fallen women, monstrous wives, brutal husbands—continue to haunt the tabloid imagination, forging a lineage through docudramas, 'true crime' podcasts, pulp fiction and other mass-market genres. As such, broadsides, ballads and chapbooks can be treated as a prehistory of modern pop culture, supplying a blueprint for sensational storytelling across media. Future research might explore how their visual-verbal dynamics intersect with other forms of violence (e.g., infanticide), or approach street literature using cutting-edge digital tools such as text mining, geospatial analysis, and data visualisation. The sheer volume, variety and distribution of these cultural products present an exciting opportunity for digital humanities scholars to map the nineteenth-century 'body politic' in new and inventive ways.

In sum, this project restores street literature to the centre of urgent debates about gendered crime, state and mob rule, moral panics and public storytelling in nineteenth-century Britain. By challenging what counts as 'literary', it reframes the cultural history of IPH through the popular press. These neglected texts, often scorned as crude, trite, or transitory, deserve the more sustained

attention Neuburg once called for, not only for their historical insights but for how they invite us to reappraise Victorian literature's social functions, aesthetic boundaries, and tangible forms.

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