

Victorian Murderesses

Victorian Murderesses:

The Politics of Female Violence

By

Ayşe Naz Bulamur

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To Prof. Dr. Cevza Sevgen,
My lifetime adviser and mentor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
Fallen Angels: Female Violence in the Age of Domesticity	
Chapter One.....	31
“The Great Social Evil of the Day”: Infanticide in <i>Adam Bede</i> (1859)	
Chapter Two	63
The Female Revenger in Thomas Hardy’s <i>Tess of The D’Urbervilles</i> (1891)	
Chapter Three.....	93
The <i>Unhomely</i> Court in Mary E. Braddon’s <i>Lady Audley’s Secret</i> (1862)	
Chapter Four.....	125
<i>Fin de Siècle</i> and Motion Sickness in Florence Marryat’s <i>The Blood of the Vampire</i> (1897)	
Afterword	157
Works Cited.....	161

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INTRODUCTION

FALLEN ANGELS: FEMALE VIOLENCE IN THE AGE OF DOMESTICITY

I humbly pray our good writers, moralists, satirists, humourists, by precept and example, by tongue and pen, to exorcise this evil possession of our literature, that we may not have the sorrow and shame of knowing that the reign of good Queen Victoria, our true woman and wife, will be identified in after generations with the reign of female criminals in English literature.
—Henrietta Keddie, “A Word of Remonstrance with Some Novelists. By a Novelist” (1863)¹

The reign of female criminals in Victorian novels is sensational because of the rise of domestic ideology during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), who, as the head of the British Empire, paradoxically expected women to be silent subordinates of the men overseeing the legislation, scientific investigations, and capitalist economy.² The Victorian murderesses in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), on the other hand, rebel against the ideals of feminine virtue and women’s nonexistence in

¹ Henrietta Keddie, “A Word of Remonstrance with Some Novelists. By a Novelist,” in *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890*, ed. Andrew Maunder (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), 86.

² In her 6 May 1870 letter to the prime minister William Gladstone, Queen Victoria labeled the women’s rights movement as a “dangerous & unchristian & unnatural cry” and endorsed male supremacy: “Let woman be what God intended; a helpmate for a man [...]” She also wrote on 29 May 1870 to Sir Theodore Martin, a lawyer and man of letters, that women who joined the “mad, wicked folly of ‘Woman’s Rights’ [...] ought to get a *good whipping*.” She believed that classification of sexes into public and private spheres was God-given: “God created men and women different—then let them remain each in their own position” (“Letters and Journal Entries” 1544).

the socioeconomic sphere. I focus on how the depictions of female violence in the four novels serve as critiques of sexual politics, legislation, economy, and even scientific authority in Victorian England: Tess revenges all sexually abused women by stabbing her rapist, Eliot's Hetty Sorrel commits infanticide to perform feminine virtue, the bigamous Lady Audley attempts to murder her first husband whom she cannot divorce, and the British-Jamaican Harriet Brandt's psychic power to kill those close to her hints at the rise of spiritualism in the age of science. Although representations of female violence portray discrimination against women with limited legal and economic rights, the four writers wittingly or not endorse domestic ideology by often depriving women of agency and by justifying their crimes as the products of uncontrollable forces of heredity, madness, and economic depravity. While undercutting the autonomy of their murderesses, the four novels also validate the assumption that voluptuous women are more prone to violence by depicting murderesses as adulteresses. Although their female lawbreakers receive poetic justice by being publicly executed or deported from England, the novels were often abhorred by Victorian critics for engaging with the taboo topics of sex and violence. Victorian readers, like Henrietta Keddie, were unsettled by the novels that shattered the myth of feminine purity as well as the pastoral innocence of the British countryside by casting village women as criminals. Even as the novels undermine female power by censoring the crime scenes and presenting murderesses as mere victims of heredity, they challenged their time by calling into question the idealization of women as domestic saints as well as the assumption that violence and anger are exclusively masculine traits. Whereas Victorian studies on gender and violence tend to portray women as passive victims of their abusive husbands, I contribute to the field by focusing on female killers who violate dominant ideologies of race, gender, class, and even science that support white male supremacy in Victorian England.

The current scholarship on nineteenth-century female violence focuses primarily on the biographies of famous murderesses rather than female criminals in Victorian novels: Mary Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses* covers "unspeakable crimes" of "thirteen nineteenth-century English and French women of 'respectable' middle-class status, all of whom were accused of being murderesses or accomplices in murder."³ Michael Diamond's *Victorian Sensation* and Richard Altick's *Victorian Studies in*

³ Mary Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (London: Robson Books, 1985), 1.

Scarlet also focus on the crime cases of many notorious female killers like Constance Kent, Maria Manning, and Madeleine Smith. Judith Flanders in *The Invention of Murder* and James Whorton in *The Arsenic Century* write about Victorian women who were executed for poisoning their employees or family members. Shani D'Cruze and Louise Jackson examine women, crime, and justice in England since the 1660s; Sandra Wells and Betty Alt's *Wicked Women* discusses female serial killers and gang members from the fifteenth century to the present. Investigating the connections between crime, state politics, minorities, and gender roles in New York, Jeanne W. Adler narrates the life of Henrietta Robinson, the politician John Cotton Mather's mistress, who was accused of murdering two Irish immigrants in the 1850s and was known as the "veiled murderess" due to the blue veil she was wearing during her trial. The biographies of Victorian murderesses are valuable for challenging History (with a capital H) that dismisses female lawbreakers and casts men as the sole perpetrators of physical violence.

In addition to actual life stories of murderesses, there are also studies on Victorian attitudes towards female violence, the possible connections between poverty and crime, criminal psychology, the legal treatment of female killers, and crime reporting. Carolyn Conley's *The Unwritten Law* and Lucia Zedner's *Women, Crime, and Custody*, for example, focus on the role of misogyny and inconsistent laws "in determining attitudes and responses to"⁴ the growing number of female criminals in Victorian England. Indeed, Anne-Marie Kilday's *A History of Infanticide in Britain* and Ann Higginbotham's "Sin of Age" show how judges often pardoned working-class women for the murder of their infants to prevent the rising number of illegitimate children and to protect the institution of marriage. Many unmarried women's decision to commit infanticide to perform feminine virtue also exemplifies Linden Peach's argument in *Criminal Deceptions* that gender, crime, masquerade, and performance were interrelated in Victorian England. Extensive studies on women and insanity (e.g. Showalter, Foucault, and Chesler), on the other hand, discuss how Victorians attributed female violence to madness because of the assumption that nurturing and meek women could not willingly kill their family members. Richard Altick's *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, Martin Wiener's *Reconstructing the Criminal*, and Rosalind Crone's *Violent Victorians* portray how Victorians were fascinated with the alleged madness of murderesses, their extramarital relationships, and their

⁴ Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.

sensational court cases that inspired modern crime reporting. These cultural and sociological studies on female violence show how crime is inevitably intertwined with sexual politics, criminal psychology, socioeconomic factors, and legal discourse in Victorian England.

Despite the popular interest in actual Victorian murderesses, few literary critics have focused on nineteenth-century literary representations of female criminals. Accused of murder and bigamy, Mary Braddon's arsonist Lady Audley has received the most critical attention: Andrew Mangham's *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, Marlene Tromp's *Beyond Sensation*, and Jan Schipper's *Becoming Frauds* discuss female poisoners and child-killers in the sensation novels of Mary Braddon and Wilkie Collins. The articles in Rédouane Abouddahab and Josiane Paccaud-Huguet's *Fiction, Crime and the Feminine* trace female killers in science fiction movies as well as in British, American, and Scottish novels from the nineteenth century (e.g. Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Hardy, and Braddon) to the present (e.g. Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Louise Erdrich). Josephine Hendin's *Heartbreakers* is another extensive study of female crime in film and literature, including Euripides's *Medea* (431 BC), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992). Due to their broad scope, however, both Abouddahab's edited collection and Hendin's book do not provide an in-depth analysis of female violence in a specific genre or a cultural and historical context. Virginia Morris's *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction* is the only study that examines the Victorian murderesses in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, Braddon, Collins, Doyle, and Hardy.

Other than Morris's *Double Jeopardy* and a few studies on *Lady Audley's Secret*, contemporary literary scholarship often undercuts women's potential for violence by focusing primarily on the legendary male criminals in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (1887-1927), and on the murderous barber Sweeney Todd in the penny dreadful⁵ *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846-1847). By focusing predominantly on male violence against women, many literary

⁵ In *The Invention of Murder*, Judith Flanders describes penny-dreadfuls as cheap, popular, and weekly-published crime fiction for the working-class readers: "'Penny-bloods' was the original name for what, in the 1860s, were renamed penny-dreadfuls. Each booklet, or 'number', consisted of eight (sometimes sixteen) pages, with a single black-and-white illustration on the top half of the front page. Double columns of text filled the remainder, breaking off wherever the final page finished, even in the middle of a sentence" (58).

and critical studies cast Victorian men as offenders and women as their passive victims. Martin Wiener in *Men of Blood* and Shani D'Cruze in *Crimes of Outrage*, for example, point out the “culture of physically aggressive masculinity”⁶ involving physical and sexual violence against working-class Victorian women. In *City of Dreadful Delight*, Judith Walkowitz writes how the tabloids covering Jack the Ripper’s murders in 1888 endorsed domestic ideology by casting London as a dangerous and masculine space that women should avoid by staying at home. While Anna Clark’s *Women’s Silence, Men’s Violence* also examines sexual assault of British women from 1770 to 1845, James Hammerton’s *Cruelty and Companionship* discusses matrimonial cruelty and mistreatment of Victorian women by their abusive husbands. The fascination with male criminals in current literary and cultural studies, however, strengthens the nineteenth-century belief that anger, power, and violence are masculine traits and endorses the image of women as helpless and pitiable victims of men. My project contributes to the field by focusing on how literary representations of female violence intervene in sexual politics of Victorian England and challenge the traditional assumption that women are naturally passive and tender.

I focus on the nineteenth century because it was then that female violence became sensational due to “the carefully contrived model of woman as ‘Mary’—the ‘divine guide, purifier, inspirer of the man’” as an antithesis to the “Eve-like, both corruptible and corrupting”⁷ woman. In *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer points out the gradual transformation of the female stereotype from “devil to angel” from the enlightenment to the turn of the twentieth century: “Previously considered morally vulnerable, sexually voracious, emotionally inconsistent, and intellectually inferior, she metamorphosed into the True Woman—virtuous, gentle, devoted, asexual, limited in interests to creating a proper refuge for her family [...].”⁸ Stereotyped as an evil temptress, like Eve, female characters in Renaissance drama, for example, are adulterous shrews who commit crime for love and power. In *Arden of Faversham* (1592), an anonymous Elizabethan play, Alice Arden falls in love with her maid’s brother and hires two criminals to kill her husband. William Shakespeare’s ambitious and ruthless Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, persuades her husband to kill King Duncan of Scotland and assume the

⁶ Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence, and Victorian Working Women* (DeKalb: Northern University Press, 1998), 21-23.

⁷ Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 11.

⁸ Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents The Good Mother* (New York: Penguin, 1962), 183.

kingship. In Elizabeth Cary's play *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), at a time when women had no divorce rights, Salome kills her husband to be with her lover and also plots her sister-in-law Queen Mariam's death for being allegedly unfaithful to her husband, King Herod. The adulteress Evadne in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619) avenges her honor and kills the king for forcing her into marrying another man to cover up their relationship. In Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's Jacobean tragedy *The Changeling* (1622), Beatrice, the daughter of a governor, convinces her father's servant to murder the man she is obliged to marry so that she can unite with her lover. The treacherous and violent female characters in Renaissance drama were not particularly sensational, because they confirmed the Biblical representations of the disobedient Eve, who took Satan's advice to eat from the forbidden tree of knowledge and hence became responsible for humanity's banishment from the Garden of Eden.

Victorian murderesses, on the other hand, received public reaction for countering their roles as "The Angel in the House" (the title of Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem that endorsed the strict division between public and private spheres due to the rise of industrialism and urbanization in the nineteenth century). Formerly condemned as the devil's consort due to Eve's allegiance with Satan, the angelic Victorian woman was tamed and stripped of her potential for violence. In *Crime and Punishment in England*, John Briggs et al. state that criminality in Victorian England was strictly attributed to the public sphere:

[Crime] was held to be the denial of everything that femininity represented. As the cult of domesticity became entrenched during Victoria's reign, the angel of the hearth was charged with special responsibility for the moral wellbeing of her family, and thus of society in general. Her influence was both passive and pervasive. Where her menfolk strove in the public arena, she ruled the home through her gentle, exemplary conduct.⁹

While assigning men, the breadwinners, to the workplace, the domestic ideology cast women as domestic saints—affectionate, self-sacrificing, and subservient housewives—and the Victorian home as a heavenly refuge from chaotic and corrupted metropolises. In "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), John Ruskin also endorses the gendered dichotomy between the home and the workplace by advising husbands to protect their wives from the evils

⁹ John Briggs, Christopher Harrison, Angus McInnes, and David Vincent, *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History* (London: UCL Press, 1996), 183.

of industrialized society by confining them to the domestic sphere: “The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial [...]. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, [...], need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense.”¹⁰ As virtuous homemakers and mothers, “the angels of the house” had supposedly nothing to do with crime that was committed in the hostile, stormy, turbulent, and male-dominated public space.

Worshipping the angelic female figure, the devout Victorians were troubled by the biblical Judith, who became a national heroine for saving “the Jewish people from the armies of Nebuchadnezzar by slaying his commander-in-chief, Holofernes” “during the siege of Bethulia described in the Old Testament.”¹¹ Victorians could not accept the biblical story of the beautiful, intelligent, and fearless widow who courageously saves her town from destruction by praying to God “for the cunning wiliness that would bring the enemy to [her] knees.”¹² She seduces the Assyrian leader Holofernes and beheads him when he is drunk in his own bed:

Then she came to the pillar of the bed, which was at Holofernes' head, and took down his fauchion from thence, And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day. And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him. And tumbled his body down from the bed, and pulled down the canopy from the pillars; and anon after she went forth, and gave his head to her maid.¹³

The pious Victorians were annoyed by the biblical depiction of a murderess as the “‘heroine of Israel’ and ‘the glory of Jerusalem.’”¹⁴ Her heroism was also celebrated in the early eighteenth century when Lee and Harper’s traveling theater booth in Bartholomew Fair staged “the Ancient History of Judith and Holofernes,” which was advertised with a poster that vividly illustrated Judith holding her enemy’s “severed head high while

¹⁰ John Ruskin, “Lilies. Of Queen’s Gardens,” in *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures* (New York: American Book Company, 1916), 93.

¹¹ Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular entertainment in nineteenth-century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 56.

¹² Silvia Behrend, “The Hidden Feminine: Jung, Judaism, and Judith,” *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 8.3 (2014): 21.

¹³ “Apocrypha: Judith Chapter 13,” accessed September 14, 2015, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/apo/jdt013.htm>.

¹⁴ Virginia Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 13.

blood spurts from his trunk.”¹⁵ In the age of domesticity, however, the respected war heroine was transformed into an “unnatural” woman with allegedly male traits of physical strength and violence. Threatened by the headstrong woman, Victorians associated the name Judy with “unruly females and unmarried women cohabiting with men”¹⁶ and condemned her as the “precursor of Salome, who was prompted by her mother to ask for John the Baptist’s head as her reward for pleasing Herod with her dancing and evolved in Christian culture into an archetype of erotic and destructive womankind.”¹⁷ Ironically, Victorians undercut the mighty biblical Judith’s power by rendering her the icon of female deception and trickery for seducing and killing the drunk general. Once glorified as a war heroine, Judith in Victorian England exemplified the shrew woman who had to be tamed by men.

Victorians domesticated the daring biblical Judith in the English glove-puppet show “Punch and Judy,” as Punch violently and regularly abused his unruly wife before his large street audience in London. Victorians no longer adored Judy, whose name derives from Judith, but her brutal and murderous husband, who “wielded his deadly stick against any who crossed his path.”¹⁸ According to Rosalind Crone, the “comic buffoon” of the Restoration period transformed into a “murderous wife-beater”¹⁹ in the Victorian era when popular entertainment became more bloody and violent. Although the working-class puppet hero’s murder of the hangman, the devil, and the police officer were celebrated as rebellions against authoritative social institutions—family, the state, and the church—his domestic violence endorsed male domination of women. In the name of humor and satire, the popular theatrical entertainment excused Punch’s violence with Judy’s “unwomanly” traits of rage, lack of affection, and her neglect of her wifely duties, supposedly causing their marital problems. For example, in an 1854 script, after Punch throws his crying baby out of the window, he kills his devastated wife for attacking him with a stick: “How you like my teaching Judy, my pretty dear... Yes, one littel [sic] more lesson.”²⁰ When Punch realizes that he has murdered his wife, he “shrugs his shoulders, tosses her body from the stage and celebrates her

¹⁵ Crone, *Violent*, 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁷ Morris, *Double Jeopardy*, 13.

¹⁸ Crone, *Violent*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ J. P. Collier, *Punch and Judy, with Twenty-Four Illustrations Designed and Engraved by George Cruikshank* (London: Printed for S. Prowett, 1828), quoted in Crone, *Violent*, 55.

death in song.”²¹ Astonishingly, the audience does not sympathize with Judy, who strikes her child-murderer husband, but with Punch, who punishes his wife for challenging his authority. Wittingly or not, the audience approves of domestic violence by laughing at and even applauding Punch, who beats his wife to death and gets rid of Judy’s dead body by tossing “it from the stage with his stick.”²² By changing Punch’s wife’s name “from her eighteenth-century appellation, Joan, to Judy during the opening decades of the nineteenth century,”²³ Victorians reasserted masculine power and domesticized the unruly female warrior.

The “angel of the house” could not be, after all, a childless widow like Judith, but a mother who ensured virtue both at home and in the motherland. As Anne McClintock argues in “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven,’” a nation’s construction as a “familial and domestic space” depends “on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere.”²⁴ Tackling the problems of poverty and unemployment, England’s cultural stability also depended on self-sacrificing mothers’ duty to reproduce national and cultural values by raising strong, moral, and nationalist children, who would serve their country as dutiful citizens. Since crime, for Martin Wiener, is “a central metaphor of disorder and loss of control,”²⁵ female killers caused social turbulence by challenging the assumption that women are biologically obedient and caring. The headlines often dehumanized murderers as monsters who threatened domestic ideology by defying their most sacred duties as caretakers. The anonymous writer of “The Last of Constance Kent” in *The Saturday Review* (1865), for example, humiliates Constance Kent, who murdered her three-year-old stepbrother by cutting his throat with a razor, as a “wretched creature” “without a single human or womanly feeling.”²⁶ The Victorian writer strips Constance of her national identity as a British citizen by depicting her as a demon. She was deported

²¹ Crone, *Violent*, 55

²² Ibid.

²³ Rosalind Crone, “Mr and Mrs Punch in Nineteenth-Century England,” *The Historical Journal* 49.4 (2006): 1081.

²⁴ Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 90-1.

²⁵ Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing The Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48.

²⁶ “The Last of Constance Kent,” *The Saturday Review*, September 2, 1865, 286-287.

to Australia, just like many other criminals, who until the 1850s²⁷ were transported to the colonies for the protection of a national order that depended on feminine virtue.

Female violence was also sensational because Victorian women were the ground upon which England constructed its morally pure, noble, and benevolent identity as a foil to its dangerous, vulgar, and degenerate colonies. In *Domesticity, Imperialism, and Emigration*, Diana Archibald points out how the construction of the priestess figure is intertwined with English nationalist pride: a woman “must not only be an ‘angel,’ but she must also be English.”²⁸ To preserve the alleged moral superiority of Victorian women, many novelists depicted murderesses as foreigners. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) for example, the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, is Caribbean; her crimes of setting her husband’s bed on fire and attacking her brother legitimize the prejudice against colonized women as brutal savages who should be domesticized. Indeed, the novel advocates the moral propriety of Englishwomen by juxtaposing the violent and passionate Creole woman with the virtuous governess, Jane Eyre, who should be Mr. Rochester’s wife and produce white English children. Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*, on the other hand, shows how the Englishwomen of the *fin de siècle* continue to be the markers of England’s supposed cultural superiority: The British-Jamaican Harriet Brandt is cast as a vampiric and contagious woman who spreads death and disease in Europe. At a time when the “angels of the house” distinguished England from its so-called filthy and perilous colonies, Hardy, Eliot, and Braddon were courageous enough to have white Victorian female characters as murderesses.

Although many British newspapers also highlighted the foreign identity of many murderesses (e.g. Scottish Madeleine Smith, Swiss servant Maria Manning, and American husband-poisoner Florence Maybrick) to preserve Victorian women’s angelic image, they could not cover up the rise of female violence at a time when the cult of domesticity was at its peak. John Briggs et al. write that the putatively chaste and pious Victorian women were a major part of England’s crime scene:

Nevertheless she made up four times as large a proportion of the prison population as her successor in the present day. She got drunk in the streets, she sold her body and stole the money of those who bought it, she sold other people’s possessions, she forged money when she could not steal it,

²⁷ Morris, *Double Jeopardy*, 41.

²⁸ Diana C. Archibald, *Domesticity, Imperialism, and Emigration in The Victorian Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 6.

she committed acts of violence on members of her family and other women in the neighborhood and, at the beginning of the modern period she constituted 40 per cent of all those charged with murder. A society that prided itself on its celebration of the virtue of women was regarded by European criminologists of the second half of the nineteenth century as possessing the highest proportion of female delinquency.²⁹

The female drunkards on the streets, thieves, and money forgers showed how rebellious women violated the male-dominated public sphere by becoming criminals. Women who willfully murdered their family members, on the other hand, countered Havelock Ellis's argument in *Man and Woman* (1894) that "there can scarcely be any doubt that the criminal and anti-social impulse is less strong in women than men."³⁰ Although "early Victorian period women made up forty per cent of all those tried for murder"³¹ and "during the second half of the nineteenth century over a fifth of those convicted of crime were women,"³² women's potential for violence was undercut partially due to "the low level of recorded female crime."³³ Victorian women continued to be idealized as loving mothers as the tabloids tended to focus more on non-British murderesses and as criminology reports³⁴ often overlooked crimes of women which were regarded as more disgraceful and reprehensible than the crimes of men.

Ironically, the rise of female violence stimulated the interest in crime and even encouraged many Victorian women to become more socially and politically engaged by attending murder trials. The sympathy for murderesses became a political tool that enabled women's active involvement in the

²⁹ Briggs et al., *Crime and Punishment*, 183.

³⁰ Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), quoted in Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 23-24.

³¹ Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), 100.

³² Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴ In *Double Jeopardy*, Virginia Morris provides more detailed statistics on murders committed by women: "Women who murdered were only a small proportion of the total number of women tried for all crimes, but murder was the one crime for which women's arrest rates came the closest to arrest rates for men. Roughly speaking, women were apprehended about one-fifth as often as men for crimes in general, but between one-third and one-half as often for murder. Between 1855 and 1874, when detailed statistics are available, it was 40 percent. The annual totals of women tried for murder in that period, which ranged from twelve to forty-two, once exceeded the number of men arrested on similar charges" (30).

social sphere as they joined defense organizations, signed petitions, attempted to “visit the accused with gifts and flowers,” and openly critiqued courts that were exclusively run by male lawyers and judges.³⁵ In “Murder for Respectability: The Case of Madeleine Smith,” Mary Hartman points out the increasing participation of middle-class women in the court proceedings of female criminals:

[...] this was the fascination of large numbers of middle-class women who followed the events of Madeleine’s trial with such absorption. These women were reported as able to talk of nothing else; and they showed up in droves outside the courtroom, hoping for seats in the public gallery. The press frequently noted their presence, and just as frequently complained of the unseemly interest of proper women in the sordid details of the case. [...] The accused murderess, they saw, had acted out what they, in their most secret thoughts, had hardly dared to imagine.³⁶

Among many trials of female criminals, Victorian women were particularly interested in that of the twenty-one-year-old Madeleine Smith, a beautiful and respectable Scottish woman, who in 1857 was accused of poisoning her lover, Emile L’Angelier, “an older man of foreign ancestry and low station.”³⁷ Middle-class women were intrigued by the fact that a sexually liberated woman of their own class had the power to poison her lover, who refused to break-up with her and forced her into marriage. Many supported the daughter of a famous Glasgow architect who defied the ideals of feminine virtue, nationalist ideology, and rigid class structures by having an extramarital relationship with the son of a French immigrant, a warehouse clerk. Indeed, their attempts to save Madeleine Smith from execution were successful, as the deceased’s doctor “admitted he ‘never suspected irritant poison’”³⁸ and the court closed the case for not having substantial evidence to prove her guilty. Silenced in the domestic sphere, Victorian women became political agents as they wrote letters to judges and newspapers to revolt against gender discrimination in courts.

The newspaper headlines on the cold-blooded murders committed by women also inspired many Victorian writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Mary Braddon, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. As

³⁵ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago Press, 1999), 170.

³⁶ Mary Hartman, “Murder for Respectability: The Case of Madeline Smith,” *Victorian Studies* 16.4 (1973): 399.

³⁷ James Whorton, *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work & Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 262.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

Richard Altick writes, "Every good new Victorian murder helped legitimize, and prolong the fashion of sensational plots"³⁹ about bigamy, poison, family secrets, madness, and attempted murder. Bulwer-Lytton's female poisoner, Lucretia Clavering, for example, shares her last name with the village of Clavering in Essex, where her real life counterpart Sarah Chesham resided and was accused of "a whole string of poisonings."⁴⁰ *Lucretia or The Children of Night* (1846) became more life-like and thrilling as the title character reminded Victorians of Sarah Chesham, who was "so well known that 'mothers used to keep their infants within doors when she was seen to be prowling about the village.'"⁴¹ The readers were thrilled with a villainess, who, after reading a book about how many husbands were poisoned with arsenic in Italy, poisons first her husband and later her niece to take advantage of their life insurance policies. Collins and Braddon, on the other hand, were intrigued by the sixteen-year-old Constance Kent, who killed her stepbrother in 1860. George Eliot's *Adam Bede* is loosely based on the case of Mary Voce, who was executed in 1802 for poisoning her six-year-old daughter; and the murderous foreign maid in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* recalls the 1849 case of Swiss servant Maria Manning, who killed her lover with the help of her husband. Sensation novels that were often inspired by the cases of real-life murderesses also alarmed the readers about the rise of female criminals who defied Victorian morality.

The sensational stories of real and imaginary female criminals enabled many middle-class women to satisfy their socially unacceptable desires for sex and violence vicariously. The Victorian female novelist Eliza Stephenson stated in 1864 that even the seemingly refined and coy women were drawn into crime:

It is a noteworthy fact [...] that women of family and position, women who have been brought up in refined society, women who pride themselves upon the delicacy of their sensibilities, who would faint at the sight of a cut finger and go into hysterics if the drowning of a litter of kittens were mentioned in their hearing—such women can sit for hours listening to the details of a cold-blooded murder.⁴²

³⁹ Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murders and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (New York: Norton, 1970), 79.

⁴⁰ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴² Myron F. Brightfield, *Victorian England in Its Novels* (Los Angeles: University of California Library, 1968), quoted in Altick, *Victorian Studies*, 42.

As Eliza Stephenson implies, the high popularity of sensation novels (with “debase” and “perverted” themes of adultery and violence) among aristocratic women threatened social and class distinctions based on literary taste. In *Reconstructing the Criminal*, Martin Wiener points out the popularity of crime narratives among both upper- and working-class women: “Crime [...] was the best seller... A ‘stunning good murder’ provided all the known highest-circulation broadsheets.’ [...] Middle-class newspapers also carried large amounts of crime news, [...]. Moreover, this middle-class literature was also steeped in violence and crime, as moral reformers and *The Times* complained.”⁴³ Even pious and uptight-looking Victorian women were keen on the horrifying details of bloody murders in the headlines and in sensation novels that brought excitement to their dull and limited lives as housekeepers. Repressed by the ideals of feminine virtue and moral propriety, they were fascinated with the self-assertive female characters like Braddon’s Lady Audley, who commits bigamy and attempted murder for financial security. Many female readers vicariously fulfilled their wish to rebel against their domestic duties by listening to the stories of both real and fictional husband-murderers and child killers. These four novels with female killers, however, do not simply thrill and excite the readers with their elements of crime and suspense, but rather portray how Victorian law, economics, and even medicine and science are complicit in domestic ideology that denies women agency and endorses male sovereignty.

Murderesses as Legal Objects

The representations of female violence in the four novels serve as critiques of the Victorian judicial system by showing how murderesses become objects due to their power and courage to break the laws that often discriminate against women. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines object as the “perverse” or “a progressive despot”⁴⁴ who defies socially constructed rules and customs:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the

⁴³ Wiener, *Reconstructing The Criminal*, 15-16.

⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.

fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.⁴⁵

Although Kristeva does not specify the gender identity of the criminal, the female killer seems even more so an abject because her premeditated crime exhibits the so-called male traits of reason and calculation and also defies the ideals of feminine virtue. The four Victorian murderesses seem repulsive because they rebel against their limited legal rights and hence point out the fragility of patriarchal laws: Braddon's Lady Audley, for example, commits bigamy and attempts to murder her first husband because she has no right to sue for divorce. Tess takes the law into her hands in a society that often pardons sexual assault as a sign of male sovereignty and kills her rapist. Female criminals provoke disgust and nausea more than male criminals because they rebel against their legal, social, and economic inferiority to men.⁴⁶ Kristeva writes that the abject "lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's [master's] rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master;"⁴⁷ the Victorian murderesses in the novels I examine alarm the readers with the return of the repressed women who resort to violence due to their limited civil rights.

The four Victorian novelists show how female criminals were "radically excluded"⁴⁸ abjects or nonentities in the Victorian legal system by often omitting the courtroom scenes. Virginia Morris points out Victorian women's lack of legal rights: "No women were admitted to the English bar until 1919; the first women sat on juries in the same year, having finally become eligible when they gained the right to vote. Even then there were no female High Court or circuit court judges."⁴⁹ The absence of prosecution scenes in the novels shows how crimes of women

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁶ As Judith Knelman writes in "Women Murderers in Victorian Britain": "While male villainy was dismissed as an unfortunate regression, the same sort of behaviour in females, particularly when it was directed at males, was condemned as a hideous perversion. Deviant behaviour by men was deplorable; deviant behaviour by women was unacceptable. Violent women were depicted as fiends or monsters who could not be allowed to remain alive" (10). In *The Unwritten Law*, Carolyn Conley further comments: "Judges usually found violence by women far more reprehensible than violence by men, even when it was a defensive reaction" (72).

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Horror*, 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁹ Morris, *Double Jeopardy*, 42.

were not scientifically investigated. *Tess*, for example, portrays how the law favors men as the wealthy landowner Alec is not imprisoned for raping Tess who, in return, is arrested for stabbing her rapist on the basis of hearsay and is publicly executed without substantial evidence. *Lady Audley's Secret*, on the other hand, shows how female criminals are arbitrarily punished as the barrister, Robert Audley, does not hand his uncle's wife to the police to protect their family reputation. His house, Audley Court, literally becomes the court as Robert acts as Lady Audley's prosecutor and punisher by unjustly locking her up in a madhouse. Ironically, at the turn of the century, Harriet in *The Blood of the Vampire* is cast as a murderess solely based on the myth that her grandmother received a vampire bite, and she becomes her own prosecutor by committing suicide for unwittingly causing the death of her husband during their honeymoon. By omitting courtroom dramas from their narratives, the three writers point out the social injustices against female criminals, who often did not receive a proper trial and were arbitrarily punished.

Adam Bede—the only novel among the four to include a courtroom scene—on the other hand, shows how female criminals were treated as repulsive and filthy objects that evoked feelings of nausea and sickness in the court. Eliot shows how women were judged by their physical appearance and demeanor rather than by the evidence in Victorian courts that regarded deviance from traditional female roles a crime itself. Lucia Zedner points out “the tendency to assess female crime not according to the act committed or to the damage done but according to how far a woman's behaviour contravened the norms of femininity.”⁵⁰ M. E. Owen, for example, writes in *Cornhill Magazine* (1866) that women who disrespect the ideals of feminine beauty and modesty are susceptible to crime: “those awfully wretched-looking creatures that lounge about or squat down at the entrance of the courts with dirty faces, hair uncombed, a kerchief tied over the half-exposed bosom . . . When a woman gets to be utterly careless of her personal appearance—personal cleanliness—you may be sure that she is careful for nothing else that is good.”⁵¹ While Owen finds the lack of personal hygiene to be an indicator of a woman's criminal nature, the anonymous writer of *The Observer* (1865) judges the sixteen-year-old Constance Kent by her looks in the court rather than her crime of murdering her stepbrother. In his lengthy column titled “Personal

⁵⁰ Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 28.

⁵¹ M.E. Owen, “Criminal Women,” *Cornhill Magazine* 14 (1866): 155, quoted in Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, 28.

Appearance,” the anonymous writer comments on Constance’s potential to commit a calculated crime on the basis of her “dull” and “plain” face, which does not fit into M. E. Owen’s image of the voluptuous female criminal with cleavage:

She is an exceedingly plain-looking young person, totally unlike the photographs which are sold as her portraits; she has a broad, full, uninteresting face, which wears more an expression of stupid dullness than intelligence, and at first sight a person would hardly suppose that she was possessed of so much cunning as that which she displayed in the perpetration of the murder, which, it will be recollected, was a crime displaying the most remarkable coolness and craft.⁵²

Instead of speculating on the evidence and examination of witnesses, the anonymous writer objectifies Constance by focusing on her face expression during the trial: he is not taken in with her “deep black” mourning dress and reads her “greatest calmness” and “few tears” as indicators of her lack of regret, and her “full eyes” of her fear. In *Adam Bede*, Hetty’s wide-open eyes too indicate her fear, for the narrator, who describes her as “white as a sheet”⁵³ and as “pale hard looking culprit”⁵⁴ to cast her as a monstrous woman guilty of infanticide. Eliot draws attention to how Victorians judge female criminals by their appearance rather than by the evidence as the audience suspects Hetty due to her silence, lack of emotional outbursts, and “blank hard indifference”⁵⁵ that counter the ideal of the tender and nurturing woman. Both real and fictional accounts of court cases show how female criminals were abjectified due to their alleged uncleanness, pale white faces that defied beauty standards, and their violation of male-dominated laws.

Female Criminals and the Question of Agency

While Victorian journalists often undercut women’s physical strength by focusing on their looks rather than their crimes, the novels I examine endorse female power by depicting them not as accomplices but perpetrators of murder. At the 1858 Social Science National Association meeting, Isa Craig, for example, deprived criminal women of agency by

⁵² “Constance Kent: The Road Murder,” *The Observer* 1791-1900, July 23, 1865, 5.

⁵³ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin, 1980), 473.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 481.

falsely casting them primarily as the collaborators of men who are strong, courageous, and meticulous enough to commit premeditated murder:

One-third of the convicts of the kingdom are women, but that is a shallow calculation. Women are more often the accomplices of crime, its aiders and abettors, than its actual perpetrators. Then also they are the victims of crimes, and the seducers to crimes, which do not come within the power of the law, while inflicting the deadliest wounds on society; and over and above their own lives of crime, they become mothers of criminals.⁵⁶

Craig depicts women as passive subordinates who can trespass their domestic sphere only if they are “recruited” by men, the planners and executors of crimes. Many fictional and real-life murderesses, however, are neither mothers nor assistants of male criminals: Tess, Hetty, and Harriet do not seek any assistance from men to commit their crimes of murder and infanticide. Lady Audley, on the other hand, is powerful and dominant enough to recruit a man as her accomplice, as she convinces her maid’s fiancé to keep her crimes secret in return for jewelry. Mary Braddon’s novel presents female killers as masterminds also by recalling Maria Manning, who in 1849 killed her lover, Patrick O’Connor, with the help of her husband. During his defense, Frederick Manning admitted his passive role in the crime and claimed that he bought the crowbar with which Patrick was beaten to death upon his wife’s instructions.⁵⁷ The four novels subvert Isa Craig’s sexist assumption that women are only capable of having subservient roles in crimes by presenting the female killers as protagonists and as the leading actors of murder.

Hardy, Braddon, Eliot, and Marryat further empower their murderesses as they kill with “unwomanly” methods—physical force or knife—rather than poison, which was the most preferred weapon due to its easy accessibility and its hard detection. In *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work & Play*, James Whorton writes that 55 percent of female killers poisoned their acquaintances and their “preference for poisoning, a secretive, skulking act, confirmed male suspicions that at bottom women truly were sinister, deceitful beings.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Isa Craig, “Emigration as a Preventative Agency,” *The English Woman’s Journal* (Jan 1859), accessed September 15, 2015, http://gerald-massey.org.uk/craig/c_miscellaneous_2.htm.

⁵⁷ Judith Flanders, *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 163.

⁵⁸ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 35.

Mary Voce (1802) poisoned her six-year-old daughter, the servant Eliza Fenning (1815) her employee, Mary Ann Burdock (1835) her lodger, Mary Ann Milner (1847) her sister- and father-in-law, Susannah Holroyd (1816) her husband and children, and Madeleine Smith her lover (1857). Women preferred poison in order not to fight with their victims and to avoid shouting or screaming: "From the killer's perspective, poison was a convenient weapon, as no force or violence was required and the intended victim, unaware of the threat, was unlikely to struggle."⁵⁹ The four murderesses, on the other hand, seem more brutal and vicious because they have the so-called male traits of physical force and strength: Tess stabs her rapist with a carving knife, Hetty buries her baby in the fields, and Harriet whips the slaves at her father's plantation. Lady Audley does not use the poison she keeps in her drawer and instead pushes her first husband into the well and later becomes an arsonist to kill her husband's nephew, the detective figure in the novel. What sets the four killers apart from the female poisoners in the novels of Wilkie Collins and Edward Bulwer-Lytton is that they do not perform feminine virtue or smile while killing their victims. They counter the sinister and secretive image of women by openly displaying their so-called unfeminine traits of aggression and violence.

While boldly showing how women too can be calculating and cold-blooded criminals, however, the novels (except *Adam Bede*) also tend to deny the murderesses sociopolitical agency by attributing their violence to uncontrollable and unexplainable forces of heredity and madness they inherit from their mothers. Following the clinical and scientific approach of naturalism, Hardy, for example, makes causal connections between Tess's murder of her rapist, Alec, and her lineage as a d'Urberville, who are infamous for the murders they committed in their crime couch. Ironically, the novel's subtitle "A Pure Woman" undercuts Tess's power and autonomy by depicting her as a passive female victim of her heredity. While Hardy excuses Tess's attacks on Alec as acts of inadvertence, Braddon and Marryat explain female violence with the alleged madness women inherit from their mothers. Lady Audley, who decisively pushes her first husband down the well to keep her identity secret from her aristocratic husband, is haunted by the image of her mad mother: "I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs."⁶⁰ She

⁵⁹ Morris, *Double Jeopardy*, 34.

⁶⁰ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 297.

cannot envision herself as a meticulous and calculating criminal, but a madwoman who cannot control her violent instincts. In *Blood*, on the other hand, the British-Jamaican heiress Harriet has the unwitting power to usurp the energy of her loved ones because her grandmother was bitten by a vampire bat. *Adam Bede* is the only novel among the four that grants Hetty, an orphan, autonomy by not attributing her crime of infanticide to her lineage or family history of insanity. The scientific causality Hardy, Braddon, and Marryat draw between female criminality and heredity deprive women of agency and suggest that women cannot be voluntarily angry and violent.

Female violence is excused not only with heredity, but also with the rise of industrialism, poverty, and limited job opportunities for women. In *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, Louise Jackson writes that “morality, industry and virtue were closely related; economic failure was both a result and a sign of idleness and moral deficiency.”⁶¹ Eliot, Braddon, and Hardy, on the other hand, reverse this classist assumption by casting crime as a consequence of financial hardship. In *Tess* and *Adam Bede*, single and seduced village women resort to violence out of desperation: Hetty, a single dairymaid, commits infanticide partially because she has no child support,⁶² and she fears being sent to workhouses that were established after the 1834 law against charity, forcing labor upon the unemployed poor that paid less than factories. Due to the disintegration of agriculture and the rise of the urban economy, Tess, also a dairymaid with seasonal and underpaid jobs in Wessex, becomes the newly rich Alec’s mistress to provide for her peddler father. Having exchanged sex for family support, Tess takes revenge from Alec, who owns both the land and its women. Braddon’s novel, on the other hand, explains away Lady Audley’s desire to get rid of her husband with women’s lack of property rights until the Married Women’s Property Act (1882). Since the death of

⁶¹ Louise Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2000), 107.

⁶² In *A History of Infanticide in Britain*, Anne-Marie Kilday points out that single mothers had no financial support: “Falling pregnant during employment (especially as a domestic servant) meant dismissal without a reference and a loss of livelihood and means of support. [...] If pregnancy was discovered, however, her ability to earn an independent wage was immediately terminated, and she would find it difficult to attain subsequent employment elsewhere” (160). Fathers had no legal responsibility to care for their illegitimate children: “[...], in 1834, revised bastardly legislation was introduced through the New Poor Laws, which required the mother, rather than the father, to bear the financial burden of illegitimacy” (162).