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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Abigail E. Futrelle entitled "The liminal figure of Julia Morrison 'ladyhood' in Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1899-1900." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Lynn Sacco, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Dr. Lynn Sacco, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. Lynn Sacco

Dr. Stephen V. Ash

Dr. Ernest Freeberg

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Liminal Figure of Julia Morrison:
“Ladyhood” in Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1899-1900

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Abigail E. Futrelle
May 2009

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Acknowledgements

To my wonderful parents, friends, and professors, thank you.

Abstract

In September of 1899 Julia “Morrison” James shot and killed Frank Leiden on the stage of the Chattanooga Opera House in Tennessee. The two were the leading actors in the play entitled “Mr. Plaster of Paris.” The court charged Morrison with first-degree murder and held her in the city jail through the end of her trial in January of 1900. Public support was overwhelmingly behind the female murderer until the end of the trial. The jury found Morrison not guilty of the murder of Leiden on the grounds of temporary insanity. Immediately after the jury announced her acquittal Morrison began announcing plans to give a lecture entitled “The Other Side of Stage Life” and thanking all those who played a role in her just verdict. Chattanooga and other southerners held Morrison up as a lady and representative of “ladyhood” from the moment she murdered Leiden through the delivery of the verdict. It was assumed that as a lady in the South she would be found not guilty. Southerners did not consider her behavior after the verdict appropriate for a lady, and public opinion began to turn against her, the verdict, and Chattanooga. Morrison caused southerners as members of the “New South” to reevaluate what qualities constituted a lady, making her a liminal figure in the South’s conceptualization of ladyhood. The change represented in Morrison’s case is also found in comparing her case to that of two other murderesses in Tennessee in 1893 and 1913. The 1893 trial ended with a verdict of not guilty due to incurable insanity, and the 1913 trial ended with a guilty verdict. Together these three cases demonstrate the transition present in Morrison’s case in the span of three decades at the turn of the twentieth century.

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Chapter 1

The Murder

On Tuesday, September 19, 1899, readers of the *Chattanooga Daily Times* in Tennessee began to anticipate the arrival of a new “amusement” to their city entitled “Mr. Plaster of Paris.” Describing the play as “very funny” and full of “merry makers,” the *Times* concluded, “The company from start to finish is composed of first-class people, elegant costumes and will guarantee an evening of unctuous fun and music.” The Opera House advertisement for the play promised “180 Laughs in 180 Minutes.”¹ On Wednesday, the *Times* reported that all the players were “well known” and “would undoubtedly provide an evening’s entertainment which will be long remembered here as one of the very best of the dramatic season.”² The final *Times* piece anticipating the play was published on the day of opening night and promised “rare humor and startling situations.”³ The play would certainly live up to these expectations. Debuting in Knoxville the night before the scheduled Chattanooga performance, “Mr. Plaster of Paris” appeared in the *Knoxville Journal*’s amusement column with some of the same plays as the Chattanooga paper. The Knoxville paper, however, was much more detailed in its description of the play’s plot. The play centered on Mr. Plaster’s quest “for the gullible who do not belong to Paris, a Paris, any Paris.” After collecting a group of “victims” his wife divorced him on the grounds that she could not know whether she was “respectable or a bigamist.” The plot continued in this farcical way as Mr. Plaster connived more men and their money into his “scheme.”⁴

¹ “Amusement,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 19, 1899, 6.

² “Amusement,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 20, 1899, 6.

³ “Amusement,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 22, 1899, 6.

⁴ “Amusement,” *Knoxville Journal*, September 17, 1899, 16.

On Friday, September 22, a large audience filled the seats of the Chattanooga Opera House waiting for the curtain to rise on the anticipated play of the evening. The orchestra had finished their opening piece and “the audience was in that particularly happy frame of mind in expectancy of the fun and frolic to follow.” As the *Times* reported, “Everybody was in capital spirits and prepared for an evening of merriment and jollity, the ‘Mr. Plaster of Paris’ company having been heralded as one of the best and most successful funmakers of the rollicking kind on the road.” As the scheduled time for the performance approached the audience looked towards the curtain in preparation for its rise. Instead of the sounds of the “funmakers” they heard three distinct pistol shots come from behind the curtain. The Opera House’s manager Mr. Albert immediately recognized that this was not part of the play. As some patrons began to stir and leave, Albert assured the audience that all was well and to remain seated. Sufficiently reassured, the audience broke into smiles thinking that the shots were part of the opening act – after all, the production of *Oklahoma* had opened the same way. The orchestra began to play again at Mr. Albert’s request and the audience settled back into happy expectation of the play.⁵

But the shots were not a part of the play. The farce’s leading lady, Julia Morrison, had just shot her leading man on stage. As the *Times* would report the next day, “It was a terrible thing; the audience was agog with amusement, the... [orchestra] was playing ragtime, while Frank Leiden lay dying!” It was not until Dr. Ellis and Dr. McClellan were called to the stage that the audience sensed that something was truly wrong. Soon afterwards a Mr. Stoops came on

⁵ “Frank Leiden, Actor, Shot By A Woman,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 23, 1899, 1.

stage and informed the audience that “a distressing accident had happened to one of the performers” and that they would be reimbursed for their admission fee at the ticket office. The *Times* reported, “With remarkable rapidity the story of the tragedy went from mouth to mouth, and before the house was emptied everybody knew the details.”⁶

The facts were never in dispute. Julia Morrison had arrived at the Opera House at her usual time before the performance but had disappeared quickly into her dressing room. Her husband, Frederick James, was traveling with the theater company but remained at the hotel where the couple was staying. Frank Leiden, leading man and stage manager of the company, knocked on all the dressing room doors shortly before eight o’clock and went to the stage in preparation for the night’s performance. As Miss Morrison failed to appear, he became nervous and asked the Opera House’s stage manager Mr. W.J. Patterson to go to her dressing room. On his way to her room, Patterson passed Morrison going down the back stairs of the stage in her street clothes. After informing Leiden of this, he told Patterson, ““Won’t you go and tell her for me to come on. I do not want any trouble or unpleasantness, and I know that she is not feeling kindly toward me, and I cannot go to her.”” Realizing she was in the “lady’s toilet,” Patterson sent Miss Morrison’s maid to notify her that Mr. Leiden was waiting for her on stage in order for the play to begin.⁷

Shortly after receiving the message, Morrison rushed passed Patterson to Leiden on stage with a drawn revolver in her hand. With it Julia Morrison fired three shots into Frank Leiden. The first made Leiden lose his balance; the second shot went into the actor’s head and neck; and the third shot went in his face as he lay on the stage floor saying, ““You would kill me, would

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

you.”” Morrison then turned and walked to the rear of the stage proclaiming to those present, ““He forced me to do it.”” Shortly thereafter Morrison was arrested and taken to jail. Leiden died in less than ten minutes after several failed attempts to speak again.⁸ Less than four months later in January 1900, an all-male jury in Chattanooga, Tennessee, found Julia Morrison not guilty of the murder due to temporary insanity.

⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The case of *The State of Tennessee v. Julia Morrison* occurred between two other compelling murder trials in the state with women as the defendants. The first of these three murders occurred in the winter of 1892 in Memphis, Tennessee, when Alice Mitchell murdered her lover Freda Ward by slashing her throat when the latter failed to follow through with the couple's plans to pass as a heterosexual couple. The trial proceedings occurred the next year and ended with a non-guilty verdict and the sentencing of Mitchell to an insane asylum. The third murder occurred in the spring of 1913 near Nashville, Tennessee, when Anna Dotson murdered Charlie Cobb in the middle of his barbershop after she confessed to her husband that she and Cobb had been having an affair. The trial ended with a guilty verdict and a sentence of five days for Dotson to spend on a work farm. Lisa Duggan gave the Mitchell-Ward murder extensive scholarly attention in her work *Sapphic Slashers* (2002). The Dotson-Cobb murder has not received attention from the scholarly community but from a Nashville judge, Kip Gayden, in the historical novel *Miscarriage of Justice* (2008). The three murders and the three trials produce an image of change concerning notions of gender and justice in the South. Julia Morrison's case alone illustrates the changing perceptions of ladyhood in the South at the turn of the century. She served as a transitional figure for Chattanooga in their conception of what qualities constituted the definition of a lady. Morrison challenged traditional notions of ladyhood after her trial and caused Chattanooga to reevaluate who they perceived as a lady.

The Mitchell-Ward murder occurred at a time when a vocabulary did not exist for the couple's relationship. Duggan argues the press coverage of the murder contributed to the

emergence of the identity of “lesbian” and that dominant discourses produce identities. Because the Memphis community could not conceptualize the relationship between Mitchell and Ward and the motivations behind Mitchell murdering Ward in 1893, the all-male jury found Mitchell not guilty due to incurable insanity, despite her confession and all other evidence to the contrary that she had killed Ward. Morrison was also blatantly guilty of murdering Leiden, and the all-male jury in 1900 found her not guilty of murder on the grounds of temporary insanity. By 1913, however, another all-male jury found Anna Dotson guilty of murder. Like Morrison, she murdered Charlie Cobb in front of numerous witnesses and openly confessed that she had murdered him. The reasons for the changes in the outcomes of these three trials, despite their similarities, lies in the different contexts in which each trial took place. By the time of the Dotson-Cobb murder, the women’s suffrage movement had become a part of the public consciousness and the defense used that fact in order to persuade the all-male jury. Her punishment was only five days of hard labor but she was found guilty and punished. Mitchell and Morrison were not.

Because of this shift in the outcomes of Mitchell and Morrison’s trials in 1893 and 1900 and Dotson’s in 1913, Morrison’s case takes on a more pertinent meaning in the context of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the South as a whole at the turn of the century. Had her trial occurred seven years before at the time of Mitchell’s, the verdict would have most likely remained the same. Had her trial occurred thirteen years later at the time of Dotson’s, the verdict could have very well been similar to Dotson’s. Though Dotson’s guilty verdict evoked complaints from the Nashville community, the presence of the women’s suffrage movement was strong enough over a decade later to play a role in her trial. Because the jury found Morrison not

guilty of her obvious murder of Frank Leiden and because public opinion supported that decision, Morrison's case belongs to a different time in the South's consciousness concerning women and murder than Dotson's. What connects her case to Dotson's is what occurred after Morrison received her acquittal. Literally minutes after the jury foreman delivered her verdict, public opinion began to immediately shift from one of sympathy for Morrison to one of scorn. She began to thank all of those who played a part in the delivery of justice in her case and began announcing plans to give a lecture about what life was really like in the theater. Chattanooga and the South had embraced her as lady and given her their sympathy. Once she received her acquittal and began to not act as they thought a lady should, public opinion turned against her. Both men and women in Chattanooga and other southern cities began to speak out against Morrison personally and the non-guilty verdict she received.

National newspapers reported the murder and the trial, but they did not report on Morrison or the trial any further than publishing the verdict. Southern newspapers continued to follow public opinion in the days following Morrison's acquittal. The sudden shift in the southern public's opinion of Morrison and her case illustrates the broader change apparent in the comparison of her trial and Dotson's on a smaller and more detailed scale. Morrison served as a liminal figure for the people of Chattanooga and the South as a whole. She represented the transition in notions of lady and ladyhood at the turn of the century. The South, or the New South, was in the process of urbanizing and modernizing. As the nineteenth century fell into the past and southerners looked towards the twentieth century, cases like Morrison's gave them reason to pause and reevaluate how they would conceptualize ladyhood in the new century. The

nation responded to the sensationalism of the murder and the trial but lost interest once the jury announced the verdict. Morrison's fall from ladyhood and loss of public sympathy was only acknowledged by southerners responding to the coverage of the trial in the *Chattanooga Daily Times*.

The murder of Frank Leiden by Julia Morrison cannot be made sense of within the confines of this work. What can be made sense of is why there was such open public sympathy to the murderess and not the victim and why that sympathy disappeared after the jury announced the verdict and Morrison reacted to it. The Chattanooga newspaper provided detailed information about the couple's introduction to and relationship with the theater company and attempted to piece together Morrison and Leiden's pasts. The newspaper's work, however, does not result in a complete picture of either the couple or their relationship with the company. I have tried with great effort to make sense of how this pair came to be involved with a theater company in New York City but the available sources do not allow me to answer that question. Neither Morrison nor Leiden left any diaries or correspondence referencing the murder or the trial. Perhaps sources from other members of the company exist but are beyond the scope of this project.

Despite the sensationalism of the case and the Chattanooga newspaper's detailed coverage of the murder and the trial, Chattanooga also failed to leave behind sources referencing the case, with the exception of the House manager Mr. Albert's son. The murder and the trial also received coverage in national newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the *Washington Post*. I will be using these newspaper sources in order to make sense of the reception of the murder and the trial and the shift in public

opinion after the verdict. This reception reveals the contested perception of ladyhood by urban southerners at the turn of the twentieth century.

Lisa Duggan argues in her examination of the Mitchell-Ward murder that Mitchell's act of murder was a "social action" and compares it to the work of Ida B. Wells. Both women worked in a variety of institutions and professions and through them "emerged pieces of an emerging American modernity." Duggan's analysis presents the case as a departure from Victorian American values and the rejection of the traditional white nuclear family. She uses newspapers to provide the majority of the evidence in her work and uses them as a "cultural narrative" of American modernity to explore their impact on modern American institutions.⁹ The sensationalism of the Memphis murder lies in the fact that the women were lovers, but Morrison's murder was also sensational even though she was an unknown actress. If so, why did her case receive so much attention? In his work on urbanization and murder, Eric H. Monkkonen argues, "If murder weapons are the most basic part of killing the next most basic may be gender." Typically, men murder other men.¹⁰ Alice Mitchell murdered Freda Ward for her refusal to live according to the couple's gender roles and take part in their plan to pass as a male-female couple. If men typically murder men, then why did Julia Morrison's husband not commit the murder of Frank Leiden on her behalf?

In another work on gender and murder, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (1998), Patricia Cline Cohen makes sense of the murder of Helen Jewett, a well-known prostitute in New York City in the 1830s, and the social context of her murder. Cohen also uses sensational newspaper reporting to explain the popularity and attention paid to the murder of Jewett. Cohen explains that

⁹ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 31 -35.

¹⁰ Eric H. Monkkonen, *Murder in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.

deliberate and premeditated murder was not only rare in that decade but that in the case of Jewett “premeditated murder delivered by hatchet blows to the head was far from routine.” Most importantly in relating Jewett to Morrison, Cohen writes, “A gruesome murder held the power to shock, startle, and alarm; it disrupted daily life even in a fast-growing and increasingly impersonal city.”¹¹ Given the attention paid to the Morrison-Leiden murder in the Chattanooga newspaper, other southern publications, and national publications, the murder qualifies, using Cohen’s argument, as a welcomed, though violent, distraction from the daily life of Chattanooga as its population grew and the city became “increasingly impersonal.” In fact, Morrison’s murder of Leiden was very personal because it was so public. The audience heard the shots fired by Morrison from behind the curtain and was technically witness to the murder in a public but intimate space where the performance was intended for them.

¹¹ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York, Vintage Books, 1998), 20-21.

Chapter 3

The Trial

Though the evidence that she committed premeditated murder, in cold blood, in front of numerous witnesses went without contradiction, Morrison remained a lady in the eyes of Chattanooga and the South. Because she was verified as a lady the defense could center their case on the relationship between Leiden and Morrison and attempt to prove the defendant temporarily insane at the time of the murder. The trial began on Friday, January 5, 1900. After the selection of the jury and the first initial witnesses, the second day of the trial was highlighted by Morrison's own testimony. The managers of the Opera House and the theater company, Mr. Patterson and Mr. Harris, had already corroborated on the events of September 22, 1899, and on the apparent tension between Morrison and Leiden and Morrison and her husband and the company in general. The *Times* reported that her initial testimony was delivered in "a low and musical voice." All doubts concerning her abilities as an actress were removed "for never was a tale more artfully told, never were gestures more perfect, expressions more sad, more innocent, or the blush of shame more crimson than when they mounted the snow-white brow of this fair prisoner."¹² Morrison's ladyhood had quickly won the support of the *Times*.

In recounting her life before her employment with the "Mr. Plaster of Paris" company Morrison told the courtroom about an injury she had sustained as a child. When she was nine or ten years old a horse had hit her in the head. She claimed, "I still suffer from that injury. I have violent headaches and severe pains. Any excitement I undergo always affects my head considerably." Contrary to reports from New Orleans concerning Morrison and James, she

¹² "Julia Morrison on the Stand," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 6, 1900, 1.

claimed that she had previously performed for her own theater company under the management of her husband and had played the leading lady in several of Shakespeare's plays. Morrison stated that she "clerked" for a short while before seeking employment with Mr. Harris's company in New York. Morrison asserted that Leiden had been "very gentlemanly" toward her at first but then suggested an "indecent proposal" one evening when escorting her to her room. She asserted that troubles between the two of them soon began after she rejected him.¹³

After the second day's testimonies, the defense called several doctors to the witness stand in order to support the defense's claims that Morrison was temporarily insane at the time of the murder. The defense announced the plan on the second day of the trial, but the doctors did not testify until the third day. Using Morrison's claim that she had sustained a head injury as child and her repeated moments of "forgetfulness," the defense claimed that she had to be of "an unbalanced mind" that was only aggravated by the harassments of Leiden and others in the theater company. The Sunday *Times* headlined, "She Is Confused By Cross-Examination...But the Fair Witness Attributes Slight Discrepancies to Her Poor Memory."¹⁴

The first main witness after Morrison was Boyd Browder, "a colored boy employed at Staub's theater in Knoxville." His admission as a witness aroused some controversy because of his age and race, but the controversy was quickly overruled. Browder testified that Leiden abused Morrison while in Knoxville because she would not wear a particular dress. Browder had overheard Leiden threaten her with finding another woman to play her part if she refused to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Temporary Insanity Miss Morrison's Plea," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 7, 1900, 1.

change into the costume he preferred. Browder had also overheard Leiden tell Morrison, "... I will show her what I will do for her." Morrison's attorney T.C. Latimore stated, "We insist that this statement was a threat on the part of the deceased against the defendant and is competent on the ground that it was a threat to do her violence." Other threats also occurred on different occasions, and Latimore stated that the defense's purpose was to show that up through the company's arrival in Chattanooga "the deceased continually abused, vilified and threatened the defendant" and "that his threats finally culminated in an assault and battery upon the accused." Latimore claimed that at the very least this evidence would prove that Morrison did not deserve punishment even if the evidence did not prove that the homicide was justified.¹⁵

The third day of the trial also brought several depositions regarding Morrison's "good character." Men and women both wrote that she was "a lady in every respect" and "led a virtuous life." A Margaret Arnsworth wrote, "The character of Mrs. James was most excellent. Her conduct was very lady like. Her oath is entitled to full weight and credit." A Mr. Morris wrote in his affidavit that he was the manager at one of the opera houses at which the "Mr. Plaster of Paris Company" had performed. He asserted that Morrison was an excellent leading lady but that Leiden had tried to have him "lock up" her husband Mr. James for being present at the performance. A Mr. Webster witnessed a similar incident at the same opera house when he saw Leiden shaking his fist at James and asking him why he was not at the hotel.¹⁶ Any discrepancies about the exact pasts of Morrison and James or any confusion on Morrison's part concerning her examinations by the State were countered by the depositions confirming Morrison's ladyhood

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

and the tensions between the Jameses and Leiden. The most damaging evidence the State was able to procure against Morrison was a letter she had written to the company's manager, Mr. Harris, regarding Frank Leiden. The letter and the issue of Morrison's sanity occupied the fourth and fifth days of the trial.

The *Times* gave the letter the title "The Damaging Letter" and printed it as one of the strongest pieces of evidence against the defendant. Morrison wrote the letter while the company was in Knoxville the night before the infamous Chattanooga performance, and Harris received the letter and the news of Leiden's death at almost the same time. The letter began, "Dear Mr. Harris – Not another day will I endure this hell." Morrison claimed that she was the recipient of "intense hatred" and that "every imaginable object" had been placed before her to cause her to perform inadequately. "I have kept quiet and held my place as a lady for your sake. But I do not have to stand it any longer. Now you telegraph Frank Leiden to shut his d–n mouth and let me alone or I'll go no farther. He leaves or I leave." The letter continued for a few more lines in the same vein and was signed by the defendant. She initially "hesitated about identifying the signature" but conceded and stated that she had dictated it to her husband and that she had signed it. If Morrison's status as a lady had been at all damaged by the letter, the *Times* corrected any damage to her ladyhood by closing the day's coverage of the trial with a note about Morrison's "stage gowns": "For the benefit of the ladies it should be stated that Miss Morrison's stage wardrobe will be exhibited in court today."¹⁷

On the fifth day of the trial three doctors gave their "expert testimony" concerning Morrison's mental and physical health. The defense hoped that with these physicians and

¹⁷ "The Trial of Julia Morrison," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 8, 1900, 1.

Morrison's own testimony that a case of temporary insanity could be proved. The *Times* summarized the physicians' testimonies with the headline "Physicians Express the Opinion That Miss Morrison Did Not Know Right From Wrong When She Shot Leiden." By this point in the trial public interest remained high and Chattanooga's police deputies were kept busy with the task of maintaining order in and outside of the courthouse. The number of "ladies" present also increased with each day of the trial in the hopes of the jury reaching "an acquittal or a mistrial."¹⁸

Inside the packed courtroom the defense asked Dr. McQuillan and Dr. Wert a hypothetical question "involving the circumstances similar to those Miss Morrison endured during her connection with the company and under which she shot and killed Leiden." They were asked "if they believed under such circumstances a person was mentally responsible for what he or she did." Both doctors had examined Morrison and found a "depression upon her head" that corroborated with her testimony of having been kicked by a horse as a child. Both doctors also agreed that given the circumstances of the hypothetical question, their examinations of Morrison, and the information presented during the trial "that Miss Morrison did not know right from wrong when she shot Leiden." Both doctors were furthered questioned about the indentation in Morrison's skull and its connection to her sanity in general and in terms of the murder. No precise correlation was found between the injury and her sanity with the exception of Dr. Wert's answer of "Not always" to Colonel Clift's question, "Does a flattened condition of the skull always produce insanity?"¹⁹

On Wednesday, January 10, the *Times* front page headlined, "MORRISON CASE GOES TO THE JURY TODAY." The sensational case was coming to a close as the fate of Julia

¹⁸ "Was Julia Morrison Insane?," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 9, 1900, 1, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Morrison was “in the hands of twelve men.” The paper noted of Morrison, “When on the witness stand she was all smiles, now she is dejected and jaded and doubtless wishes that the ordeal was over.” The State used the last day in court to attack the insanity plea, particularly the part concerning Morrison’s childhood head injury, stating, “She has a crack in her head. I have imagined since that I have a dozen cracks in my head.” Captain Donaldson also attacked the testimony of the doctors and the “hypothetical question” posed to them by the defense: “The hypothetical questions are only based upon half the facts. The doctors say that should the facts stated in the hypothetical question be correct, such and such and so and so is the case.” He went on to say that the “facts” are not correct and “this evidence is to be received the most cautiously of any in law.” His final comments were incensed as he called the defense’s pleas of emotional insanity and irresistible impulse “absurd” and Morrison’s trouble “deplorable.” After his tirade against the defense’s case, Donaldson concluded,

We must always bear in mind that society is held together by good women and if we relieve them from the moral bonds of law it will tend to break down that love we hold for them. Love them singly and as a sex, as every good man does. It is their purity, their gentleness that keeps us at their feet. This poor woman has gone wrong, God knows. We can’t help it. Let the voice of the law and its will be done.²⁰

In these closing words from the State, it is clear that Morrison’s fate was not the only thing at stake with the outcome of this trial. The role of women in society was in jeopardy. Ladies, “good women,” were the keepers of society’s morality, and if Morrison was found not guilty of murder then women would no longer hold the responsibility that they once did in society.

²⁰ “Morrison Case Goes To The Jury Today,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 10, 1900, 5.

The closing statements of the defense both countered and supported Donaldson's plea for the saving of ladyhood. Mr. Williams made the closing remarks concerning Morrison's sanity at the time of the murder and again traced it back to the injury her brain had suffered as a child and how Leiden had aggravated her emotional stability since she joined the company. He asked the jury,

Being thus perplexed and wounded who would doubt that her mind went finally to the point of desperation? Is there any wonder that she became frenzied on this unfortunate night, when, sick in mind and body, Leiden renewed again his monstrous proposals? Do you wonder that her mind was destroyed and her reason was dethroned? Can you in the face of these facts, hold her responsible?

According to Williams, her susceptibility to emotional and physical distress alone made Morrison a lady, and a lady such as Morrison could never exert enough control over herself in the face of a man so "monstrous" as Leiden.²¹

Williams not only held ladyhood's fate up to the jury but the state of Tennessee and the right of self-defense. He hailed Tennessee as "a state within whose borders dwells a manhood as courageous as any in all the earth, and a womanhood as sweet and pure as any flower that blooms upon the highest peaks of our mountains...." He concluded by saying that if a woman can be put to death for defending her virtue "then the highest honor that can be conferred upon any woman is to die such a death."²² Between Donaldson's and Williams's closing statements, Morrison was no longer the only woman on trial in Chattanooga that day. All the women of Tennessee and the South were on trial. The morality of society and both its men and women

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

were also on trial. If Morrison was convicted, then society's notions of a "good woman" were saved. If she was found not guilty, then society would have to reevaluate what constituted a "good woman" and the men and women of Tennessee would have to reevaluate their society and their perceptions of "manhood" and "womanhood."

Chapter 4

The Initial Response to the Murder

The defense's case contained the same sympathy for Julia Morrison as the public's initial response to the murder. Understanding the outcome of the trial must precede understanding the initial response to the murder because it is in the final stages of the trial that Chattanooga fully confirmed their understanding of Julia Morrison as a lady. The closing arguments of the trial are crucial to understanding Morrison's rapid fall from ladyhood after the delivery of the final verdict. It is in the final words of the State and the defense that the real case is laid before the jury. Julia Morrison was not the only woman receiving a verdict on January 10, 1900. Southern society and southern conceptions of womanhood and ladyhood were also on the stand with Morrison. When she began to behave as someone less than a lady once the jury delivered her acquittal, Chattanooga were forced to reevaluate how they understood the notions of lady and ladyhood. Morrison's status as a lady was solidified through the public's initial response to the murder and the newspaper accounts of the preliminary hearings and Morrison's past.

The day after the murder, September 23, the front page of the *Chattanooga Daily Times* read "FRANK LEIDEN, ACTOR, SHOT BY A WOMAN." The following article stated:

It was the most sudden and unexpected transition from comedy to tragedy ever witnessed by Chattanooga theater-goers; and while the fatal shots were not witnessed and the death struggle was behind curtains, the change in spirits was even more marked on the faces and in the spirits of the audience than was ever created by any act on the mimic stage. It was realism not expected, and the shock was complete and startling. No one who was in

that audience will hear a pistol shot on the stage again that the memory of last night's tragedy will not flash through his or her mind.²³

The reality of a murder occurring immediately before an anticipated performance on the same stage would prove difficult for the community to mentally process before they began to rally in support of Morrison. The story was presented as a dramatic and sensational moment for Chattanooga and the nation. In addition to this dramatic introduction to the news report, the *Times* continued to focus on the "general excitement" caused by the shooting, claiming, "No tragedy that ever occurred in this city created more intense excitement." Within minutes "the news had spread to the streets, the hotels and loitering places." There was a great "fervor of excitement" among Chattanoogaans and strangers in town. The "telephone exchange was deluged with calls for police headquarters," the newspaper office, the Opera House, Sharp's undertakers, and any place where one might be able to find out more information about this shocking murder. Crowds gathered at all of these places throughout the night, including the jail, in order to "catch a glimpse of the fair murderess." Even "ladies stopped with bated breath" asking anyone they could for details.²⁴ The news had reached Knoxville, Tennessee, by the next day with the first page of the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* reading "REAL TRAGEDY ON THE BOARDS – Sensational Murder at Chattanooga Theater."²⁵ The same day the first page of the *Atlanta Constitution* read, "TRAGEDY INSTEAD OF FARCE COMEDY – Chattanooga Opera House the Scene of Blood Last Night."²⁶

Beyond the South, the front page of the *New York Times* read similarly, "REAL MURDER ON A STAGE," and the first page of the *Washington Post* read, "KILLED BY

²³ "Frank Leiden, Actor, Shot By A Woman," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 23, 1899, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "Real Tragedy on the Boards," *Knoxville Journal*, September 23, 1899, 1.

²⁶ "Tragedy Instead of Farce Comedy," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 23, 1899, 1.

LEADING LADY.”²⁷ Beyond the east coast, one of the first-page headings of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* read, “SHOOTS THE STAGE MANAGER.”²⁸ It was not only the murder to which these newspaper editors were attracted but also to the fact that, as the Chattanooga paper stated the most clearly, Frank Leiden was shot by a woman. A woman murdered a man. In fact, she had killed him in public and claimed she was justified in doing so for “he had insulted and abused her” and, therefore, her “deed was done with coolness.”²⁹

Though not present at the scene of the crime, Morrison’s husband was also arrested as an instigator of the murder. The couple and the theater company all corroborated on the fact that there had been tension between Morrison and Frank Leiden since the theater company hired her in late July of 1899. Julia “Morrison” James had approached the company in search of employment as an actress in their new production “Mr. Plaster of Paris.” The play was a farce that had been well received by audiences in London but was now making its American debut in New York City and then continuing down the east coast for the season. The head of the company and the owner of the play and its copyright was Joseph P. Harris, and he was the one who had hired Morrison. The play’s run began on August 1 and continued in New York through the company’s departure to the South on August 31. Miss Morrison (her stage name) was married to Frederic Henry James. He had also sought to secure employment with the company in order to look after his wife as she traveled. Unable to acquire an official position for her husband, Miss Morrison arranged for him to accompany her on the tour regardless of his employment status with the company.³⁰

²⁷ “Real Murder on a Stage,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1899, 1; “Killed By Leading Lady,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1899, 1.

²⁸ “Shoots the Stage Manager,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 23, 1899, 1.

²⁹ “Frank Leiden, Actor, Shot By A Woman,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 23, 1899, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Morrison was not an experienced actress, making her an odd choice for the role of leading lady on behalf of Mr. Harris. In addition to being inexperienced at her job, Miss Morrison did not start her relationship with the company off well by bringing her husband with her on the tour. Consequently, by the time the company reached Knoxville, Tennessee, the night before the scheduled show in Chattanooga, tensions between Morrison and Leiden had achieved a new level of intensity. The papers reported that the pair had “quarreled at Knoxville” in Staub’s Theater over Morrison’s dress for a scene in that night’s performance. Morrison stated that she would wear the particular dress “whenever she pleased,” and Leiden told her he would fine her ten dollars if she did. According to another member of the company, Roger Ryerly, the tensions between the pair were the result of Morrison’s “inability to perform her part to the satisfaction of the stage manager.” Ryerly had heard their insults but denied that Leiden had ever threatened her – and had only once heard her call him a drunkard. However, after a previous rehearsal he had overheard Morrison say, “I’ll put a ball through you: I have got my nerve.” To which Leiden replied, “Yes, you have got your nerve to be playing on the stage.”³¹

After he was taken from his room at the Tschopik house where he and Morrison had been staying in Chattanooga, the *Times* interviewed James in jail and described him as “a fine looking man, smoothly shaven and above the average as to height” with “jet black hair and eyes.” He stated that his wife had been “subjected to insults” and called the company a “low class of comedy artists” and stated that he and his wife were “different.” The reporter quoted him as saying, “You know that among this class of people the men and the women travel and occupy the same rooms, etc.; and they expected to take my wife out on this sort of an expedition.” He went

³¹ Ibid.

on to say that Mr. Harris was in compliance with James accompanying his wife on the company's tour and that he would be given the first available position on the "business staff." He claimed that Harris was also in agreement that he should go with her "as a matter of protection" and that "everything ran along nicely, until it became known that there was a husband along to protect her." He insisted that from the moment the rest of the company realized the true purpose of his presence that trouble began between the couple and the company. In particular he stated, "You can see that my wife is a fine looking woman, and they were jealous of her. This same man, Leiden, tried his best to get me into trouble somewhere along the road in order that my wife could continue with the troupe unprotected."³² The issue here was not only one of a woman shooting a man but of a woman who saw herself as part of a higher class and who defended herself against the insults and general atmosphere of "this class of people."

The Sunday after the murder the Chattanooga paper read, "The sensational opera house tragedy of Friday night, with its shocking details, was the theme of every tongue yesterday in Chattanooga." The event was discussed in private and in public and "aroused extraordinary interest and produced a greater discussion than anything of the character in Chattanooga in many a year." On Saturday afternoon Julia Morrison and her husband had a preliminary hearing where she was officially charged with the first-degree murder of Frank Leiden and James was charged as being an accomplice to the murder. The newspaper claimed that public opinion was divided on the guilt of Miss Morrison. One side believed she was indeed guilty of premeditated murder, while the other believed she was operating under duress and perhaps a temporary mental lapse due to her words following the murder and her escort to jail. The reporter admitted, "As a rule, however, public sympathy is with the fair prisoner." Views from within the quickly departing

³² Ibid.

theater company were much more unified. Conspiracy theories began to grow around the antagonism between the couple and the company. James and Morrison claimed that it was the goal of the company to get rid of the pair. Claiming that they had been “ostracized,” the couple explained how the company would not let them stay in the same hotel with them or speak to them when not on stage.³³

The stories of the company and Morrison and James began to diverge over whether the company had really “ostracized” the couple during their tour to the South and whether the company had any sympathy for Morrison after murdering Leiden. Four days after the murder, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported how the manager of the “Mr. Plaster of Paris” company, Mr. Harris, had left Atlanta to go back to Chattanooga to visit with Morrison. Apparently, the two had “wept like children” and he promised not to testify against her. Though it was already well known that the entire company had left Chattanooga for Atlanta immediately after the murder, the paper reported that no member of the company would testify against Morrison. However, the *Chattanooga Times* was adamant and extensive in its coverage of the murder and the background of the company’s key players and had already reported that the company’s sympathies were with the victim, Frank Leiden, and not with Morrison. Why the change of perception between Chattanooga and Atlanta? The background of the murder extends to Morrison’s hiring in New York City but the case and the trial essentially revolve around the troupe’s scheduled cities of Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Atlanta. As the *Atlanta Constitution* article headlined, “THEY SLIPPED OFF RATHER THAN TESTIFY AGAINST HER.”³⁴ If the company refused to

³³ “Trial of Miss Morrison Continued,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 24, 1899, 4.

³⁴ “They Slipped Off Rather Than Testify Against Her,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 26, 1899, 1.

testify against Morrison, did they really feel animosity towards her and her husband? Or did they agree that Leiden had harassed her and driven her to the act of murder?

On September 27, the *Atlanta Constitution* was again proclaiming, “SYMPATHY FOR THE PRISONER,” while reporting that James would go free and that the “best people of Chattanooga” were going to visit Morrison in jail. The paper was also predicting, “The deliberate manner in which the crime was committed leaves small hope of acquittal.”³⁵ News of the murder had even reached as far south as New Orleans, the claimed home town of Frank Leiden. Just days after the murder newspapers outside of Chattanooga even had to dispel rumors that the murder had occurred in full view of the audience during the play. An article from Atlanta concluded, “The burden of showing justification will be on Miss Morrison to save herself from prison, there being an unwritten law in this state against the execution of a woman.”³⁶ Regardless, two days later Morrison was indicted for murder by a grand jury after three hours of deliberation. The *Times* reported that she was “greatly surprised at the report of the jury, having nurtured the idea that the jury would daily to return a true bill.”³⁷ In addition the *Atlanta Constitution* reported the same day that several members of the jury visited her in jail and that she was “very much cheered” by their news “that while they were compelled under their oaths to find an indictment, they felt sure that she would be acquitted on the state’s testimony.”³⁸ These southern publications were in agreement that Morrison would not be found guilty but did not directly correlate this assumption with any legal reason. The only connection between the demanding of her acquittal and her obvious guilt was that fact that she was a woman.

³⁵ “Julia Morrison’s Husband Is Freed,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 27, 1899, 1.

³⁶ “Julia Morrison Indicted By Tennessee Grand Jury,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 29, 1899, 1.

³⁷ “Miss Morrison Indicted For Murder,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 29, 1899, 5.

³⁸ “Julia Morrison’s Husband Is Freed,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 27, 1899, 1.

The newspapers portrayed the general public as being sympathetic to the murderess and not to the victim. The company would not testify on her behalf. They had been witness to the murder, but the tensions in the theater company would most likely worsen if they were to side with Morrison. Both groups were certain that she should and would be acquitted. The public had accepted the modernity of the theater in their city but they could not accept the conviction of a woman for murder in their city, despite her obvious guilt. This disconnect between what one would expect of the majority of the reactions to the case and the actual outcome of the trial reveals the importance of sensationalism in the text of the case and the way in which Chattanooga conceptualized ladyhood at the turn of the century. The reception of the murder and trial encapsulates the feelings of Chattanooga and other citizens of urbanizing southern cities that the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century would not be an easy one. Notions of justice and gender were just two issues that became more contested as they became more complex in the setting of a modern city with theater houses and the coming presence of movie theaters and vaudeville halls. Historian Gregory A. Waller argues that at the turn of the century in the city of Lexington, Kentucky, there was anxiety among the population over what old or new worlds could be brought to the city by commercial entertainment.³⁹ Julia Morrison took the same anxiety present in Chattanooga and magnified it, and the newspapers sensationalized her story and expanded the already-present anxiety over the millennium.

The public reception to the murder and Morrison's trial revealed a city that was essentially insecure in its emerging role in the New South. As Cohen argues for the sensationalist

³⁹ Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 16.

journalism of New York City, the murder and the trial served as distractions to the people of Chattanooga. The fact that they were distracted by this public murder, its obvious lady perpetrator, and her trial reveal that Chattanooga and the South were still clinging to nineteenth-century notions of ladyhood. This is partially due to what historian Alan Trachtenberg has identified as “the image of the city as mystery.” Recognizing that this concept is partially a “trope,” he embraces the concept as a significant factor contributing to the anxiety of Americans concerning the emergence of the modern city and the metropolis.⁴⁰ Though not a metropolis, Chattanooga was a transportation hub and growing industrial center in the New South at the turn of the century and any anxiety that Americans had in larger cities such as Chicago, New York, or Atlanta, they also had in smaller cities such as Chattanooga.

These uncertainties were even more intense in southern cities like Chattanooga that were undergoing radical changes as part of the New South. Morrison’s murder trial came at a pivotal moment for the city in terms of its physical and ideological changes. The murder occurred in 1899 and the trial in 1900, allowing Morrison’s case to transcend two centuries and embody the transitioning worldview of an urbanizing southern city. The *Chattanooga Daily Times* and the people of Chattanooga are representative of other publications and citizens of urbanizing cities in the New South. The newspaper created a text that manifested the sensationalism of the murder and the trial. Class was an essential element in Morrison’s story because the relationship between the couple and the company as it was presented by the couple to the newspaper was entirely class based, and class is essential in understanding how the southern public conceptualized and perceived ladyhood.

⁴⁰ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 103-4.

Chapter 5

Chattanooga, the New South, and the Theater

In his work on murder and sensationalism, Michael Ayers Trotti uses Richmond, Virginia, to explore the relationship between mass culture, sensationalist journalism, and the emergence of modernity in the South in *The Body in Reservoir* (2008). He argues that Richmond is “an ideal setting for this investigation of crime, culture, and the South” because of its size, location, and aspirations for being the “first city” of the South. In particular, the city contained a distinct “white press” in a community that was one-third to one-half black in population. What Trotti finds is that as the twentieth century approached, newspaper reports of crime become “matter-of-fact” when compared to the reports of the early nineteenth century. The stories remained “detailed and gory” but became more “standardized” and “mechanical” by the beginning of the twentieth century. He argues that as the more modern the South became it reflected “the elaboration of mass culture’s sensationalism in the rest of the nation.” The South was much different than the rest of the nation in terms of how it perceived race and gender. Trotti argues for a South that embraced modernity and mass culture in a unique way, “not following the trails laid out by the urban metropolitan pathbreakers to the North,” and how the nature of sensationalism in the South changed over time.⁴¹

Like the works of Cohen and Duggan, Trotti’s work centers on one murder in particular, that of drowned pregnant woman found in a reservoir of Richmond in 1885. Her name was Lillian Madison, and two days after the discovery of her body the police arrested Thomas Judson Cluverius as her murderer. A practicing attorney from a prominent family in Richmond,

⁴¹ Michael Ayers Trotti, *The Body in Reservoir: Murder and Sensationalism in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 6-9.

Cluverius insisted on his innocence despite the evidence against him and the case remained the focus of public attention for two years. The *Richmond Dispatch* covered the case in great detail and it even made it to the pages of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*. The case was treated as a sensation. Trotti uses the word “sensational” to describe “that subset of crimes that struck a chord in the community, resonating strongly enough to maintain a passionate public interest for months.” The result of these crimes and their sensational coverage was a “social drama that profoundly disturbed or harrowed the community.” Because the Cluverius case did just this, Trotti weaves it throughout his work to illustrate the themes of the evolution of sensationalism in the increasingly modern South.⁴² Cohen, Duggan, and Trotti each use sensational murder in similar ways but with very different murders at the hearts of their work. Murder and sensationalism are important elements to my argument here, but my focus is on the reception of Morrison as a lady murderer by the people of Chattanooga. The shift in that reception after the verdict represents a crucial transition in how southerners’ conceptualization of ladyhood changed at the turn of the century. Like Trotti’s Richmond, Chattanooga is both unique and representative of other cities in the South during this time period.

The State of Tennessee v. Julia Morrison attracted national attention from the night of the murder in September 1899 through the trial in January 1900. Chattanooga, Tennessee, was not only a southern city but also an urban one that was becoming increasingly more connected to the emerging urban South and the country as a whole. Located on the Tennessee River and on the southern border of the state with Georgia, Chattanooga had served as a significant transportation center for decades. Almost thirty-five years after the ravages of the Civil War, the city had

⁴² Ibid., 4-5.

successfully resurrected its fledgling industries that the war had destroyed. The city's industries included Roan Iron Works, Montague's Fire Brick Works, Chattanooga Iron Company, Hoyt's Tannery, and, most recently, the city had obtained the first Coca-Cola bottling plant in 1899.⁴³ The popular bottled beverage was originally born as a patent medicine southeast of the city in Atlanta over ten years earlier. In 1896 the owner of the *Chattanooga Daily Times*, Adolph Ochs, had also distinguished the city by purchasing the *New York Times*, further making Chattanooga a city prominent in the South.

In November of 1900 the *New York Times* ran an article entitled "Cities of 25,000 or Over" that included Chattanooga, Tennessee. The federal census gave Chattanooga a population of 32,490. In 1890 the city's population was listed as 29,100. In ten years the city grew by 11.6 percent.⁴⁴ Chattanooga was steadily growing in size and in prominence in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Despite the city's national connections, traditional notions concerning women in the South surfaced from the night of the murder throughout the trial. Chattanooga still remained very much a southern city. The reception of the murder and the trial reveal contested turn-of-the-century notions of justice and gender in the South. These notions also explain why the case drew so much local and national attention. The drama of the couple's brief existence in the company and the drama of the trial were both the product of Morrison and James. The sensationalism of the case was the product of the newspaper accounts. Morrison's acquittal was the result of the spectacle's ability to be sustained and supported through the defense's case of temporary insanity and the jury's acceptance of this plea. The question of Morrison's sanity became the issue of the trial, not whether she had committed the murder or whether she was

⁴³ Michelle R. Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 41

⁴⁴ "Cities Of 25,000 Or Over," *New York Times*, November 18, 1900, 17.

justified in doing so. Morrison's acquittal was also the result of the fact that she had publicly killed a man in defense of her honor and status as a lady. This fact went unchallenged by the public.

Publicized murder and suicide committed by women were not unfamiliar to Chattanooga. The year of the Mitchell-Ward murder trial in 1893 the *Times* reported the suicide of a Chattanooga woman. The article stated, "Alice Cooper, one of the oldest and most noted courtesans of this country and one of the blackest characters in the procuress line, committed suicide by cutting her throat from ear to ear with a razor." Once a wealthy woman, she had lived in poverty the five years before her suicide. The women of Chattanooga took up a collection so that she could be properly buried, "for she had not left enough money to buy a shroud."⁴⁵ The women of Chattanooga were also not unfamiliar with supporting each other, whether a woman's fate was in question or already determined. The Morrison case attracted national attention in cities that were more experienced in handling the murder of men and women, such as the New York of Helen Jewett. What made Morrison's case sensational to Chattanooga and the nation was the text the newspapers created for it. By focusing on the defense's case of temporary insanity, the newspapers manufactured the sensationalism that Chattanooga needed to both distract them from and add to the mystery of their growing city. What distinguished Chattanooga from the rest of the country was the reception that Morrison's case received after the delivery of the non-guilty verdict.

As Duggan demonstrates in her work, "News stories in the mass circulation press during the 1890s employed the conventions of scandal or the language of sensationalism to produce

⁴⁵ "From Ear To Ear," *Knoxville Journal*, November 29, 1893, 1.

plots, characterizations, and emotional contexts organized into a range of historically specific narratives.” These narratives produced commentary on morality, character, and private politics. In addition to her analysis of the Mitchell-Ward murder, Duggan uses the example of how newspapers used sensationalism to report labor strikes in order “to shape public, class conflict through characterizations of individually careless owners or violent, crazed strikers” and the class antagonism of the rich versus the poor.⁴⁶ Concerning the couple and their supposed class status, the *Times* reported of the theater company, “They repudiated the intimation thrown out by Mrs. James that she killed Leiden to save her virtue in strong terms, stating that Leiden has so little use or liking for her that he made it a point to stay in hotels, other than the ones where she and her husband staid.” The relationship between the couple and the company contradicts itself, revealing another layer of sensationalism to the case.⁴⁷ The relationship between Morrison and James and the rest of the theater company also demonstrates class antagonism. Not only had Morrison and James created their own drama within the company and the drama of the murder and trial, the press corroborated this drama and also added to it through their extensive coverage of the murder and the trial. The newspaper’s use of sensationalist headlines and its focus on the tensions within the company and the insanity plea of the trial added to the sympathetic response of the people already present because of Morrison’s status as a lady.

Chattanoogans also felt a personal investment in the treatment of Morrison. Though not a native to the city, she was a visitor in the South and a woman and should therefore be treated as a

⁴⁶ Duggan, 35.

⁴⁷ “The Entire Troop Leaves The City,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 26, 1899, 5.

lady. On September 26, a man wrote into the *Times* in order to provide a “Southerner’s View of Miss Morrison’s Case.” He wrote, “...I do know that a woman is in trouble and as a southern man, born with the chivalric ideas of that class, I deeply sympathize with her.” The man criticized the behavior of the theater company and their “venom” towards Morrison. He wrote, “I am glad the southern people are so constituted and that these people will seek greener pastures, where people forget that a woman has a right to defend her good name and honor.” He signed his letter, “A Southern Man.”⁴⁸ The next day Manager Harris of New York claimed to the *Times* that he did not remain in Chattanooga because she was “only a woman.” Believing that she had suffered enough already, he claimed he would have set her free because he believed her to only be in her early twenties and that she would never be convicted: “The south is mighty tender with its women and there’s lots of sympathy for this one. Besides, I’ve got the bulk of the testimony, the most of the witnesses aboard with me. They won’t convict her. I could do it, but I wouldn’t. She’s just a woman; what’s the use?”⁴⁹ Both northern and southern public opinion agreed that Morrison would not be found guilty because the murder and the trial had occurred in the South.

The sympathetic response to Morrison as a “murderess” is the critical element in this examination of the case. Within the response to Morrison’s case is also the element of change in the reactions to the murder and the trial and the reactions to Morrison after the final verdict. Despite all of the sympathy and support Morrison received while confined to the Chattanooga jail for almost four months, once she was acquitted public opinion turned against her. Her actions after the acquittal did not fit Chattanooga’s perceptions of ladyhood, and the non-guilty verdict initiated a reevaluation of the elements of ladyhood in their minds and those who followed the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

case in cities across the South. Southern and non-southern publications echoed similar sentiments over the course of these four months, revealing a South that was reevaluating what type of woman constituted a lady and what that meant in terms of the New South and the increasingly modern region.

The popularity of the theater in Chattanooga served as symbol for the city's increasingly modern status. From October 1886 to March 1911, almost twenty five years, the curtain of the Chattanooga Opera House was raised 4,075 times. Averaging one-hundred and sixty performances a season, the Opera House was typically open from September through March and closed during the summer months. The "New Opera House" was originally named "James Hall" and remodeled in 1886. After the events of the "Mr. Plaster of Paris" performance in September of 1899, the owners decided to remodel the New Opera House on Market Street again in December. Market Street and Broad Street were the two main thoroughfares of Chattanooga and ran parallel to one another. The Opera House was located between the two streets on the block between 10th and 11th Streets. The building was closed from that December through September of 1900, and the management canceled "all attractions" because of the remodeling. After the renovation, the building was called simply the "Opera House." The sources left behind concerning the Opera House are extremely limited, so it cannot be determined whether the owners timed the remodeling because of the murder or whether it was just a coincidence. The son of the Opera House's manager Mr. Albert did attempt to collect what he could concerning the Opera House under his father's management. Albert recorded the event in his "date books," and his son wrote about the murder in a 1933 article in the *Chattanooga Times*. In an attempt to explain Morrison's acquittal he concluded, "A handsome woman, Colonel Clift, her lawyer, and

sob sisters got her free.”⁵⁰ In other words, Julia Morrison herself, the judge and her lawyer, and the people of Chattanooga were all responsible for her acquittal.

For Chattanoogaans the murder was so public, so premeditated, and so dramatic that they were drawn to it regardless of any notions that Morrison would be acquitted. The mere drama of an onstage murder occurring as the curtains were expected to rise would be enough to turn Morrison’s act into a sensationalist event in Chattanooga. The element of the modern theater further intensified Chattanoogaans response to the murder. Lawrence Levine argues that throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century “culture” began to take on new meanings and became segregated into the categories of “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” In the nineteenth century Americans “shared a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendents were to experience a century later.”⁵¹ Julia Morrison worked for “The Mr. Plaster of Paris” company at the turn of the twentieth century as part of the transition from this less hierarchical culture to one in which the lines between class-appropriate entertainment and culture were more defined.

By 1899 “culture” in the forms of literature, music, art, and the theater became divided between a mass culture and a “higher” form of culture that at the turn of the previous century would have been considered a “shared public culture.” Levine argues, “The process of sacrilization could operate to dethrone culture as well as elevate it.”⁵² This process extended to the theater. For example, the theater had once embraced Shakespeare as entertainment suitable for all audiences in the early nineteenth century, but by 1900 Americans took Shakespeare out of

⁵⁰ Will Seward Albert’s Scrapbooks (1902-08), Chattanooga Public Library 1886-1957, Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

⁵¹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 160.

popular access and segregated his work into a form of “highbrow” culture. In 1898 a newspaper reported, “Our audiences do not want ideas in their plays...they want costumes, and tricks of stage-carpentry, and farcical situations.” Just as some Americans feared the inclusion of “the masses” in what they considered “legitimate theater,” movie theaters and vaudeville houses provided “increasingly attractive mass surrogates for the theater.”⁵³ The play “Mr. Plaster of Paris” was part of this new public demand for “farcical situations” in the theater.

Morrison’s theatrical debut occurred at a time of flux in the nature of American culture, entertainment, and theater. Morrison was one of many actors and actresses caught in the transition between popular plays with such as “Mr. Plaster of Paris” and the notion that the theater could also be a place of a higher culture not appropriate for the masses. In addition, Levine argues that “the emerging distinction between high and low culture was based in part on an evaluation of the difference between unique and mass-produced objects.”⁵⁴ Therefore, Morrison and the theater company in which she was involved balanced in between these high/low and elite/mass notions of culture. Her play was a farce, but to Chattanooga theatergoers the play and the murder warranted the attention of all classes of people. Historian Benjamin McArthur argues that in the late nineteenth century “the theatre became highly centralized” with “plays being packaged and sent from New York to the rest of the country.”⁵⁵ Hundreds of theater companies left New York City in particular and traveled the country on annual tours; in fact, “New York asserted itself as America’s cultural arbiter by becoming the packager and dispenser of the arts for the nation.”⁵⁶ The theater was an accepted part of American life, culture, and

⁵³ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁵ Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), x.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 8.

entertainment, but actors and actresses were not so readily accepted. McArthur contends that until the late nineteenth century “players existed outside the boundaries of respectable society” and that actors consciously worked on improving their social status between the years 1880 and 1920.⁵⁷ Therefore, Morrison’s class as an actress was malleable at the turn of the twentieth century, verifying her and her husband’s assertions of their class status.

At the turn of the century working women held clerical, factory, or domestic jobs but usually left them when they married. The majority of these women were between sixteen and twenty-four years old, the age of Julia Morrison. McArthur argues that in 1900 women in traditional professions were universally discriminated against; however, the theater offered women more opportunities than other professions. In addition, the theater “had no long-standing barriers against females, and successful actresses stood on equal footing with men.”⁵⁸ He also argues that “theatrical business was carried on in an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion” and that contracts between players and the theater companies were often violated, creating an atmosphere filled with threats of lawsuits. Theater companies were filled with their own conflicts and drama, and the life of the theater company provided public gossip, rumors, and sensationalism.⁵⁹ Morrison’s murder of Leiden took a group of people already focused on the life of the theater and brought the behind-the-scenes drama of the company and put it on stage in view of the public, despite the fact that it occurred while the was curtain still lowered. McArthur concludes, “The public’s interest in the player did not end when the curtain fell.”⁶⁰ In Morrison’s case, the public’s interest began before the curtain could even rise.

⁵⁷ Ibid., ix.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 29-30.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 143.

The southern public's interest in the case was heightened because of the element of the modern theater. In addition, the public's concern and the trial's focus on where the victim and her husband originally lived were tied to southern concerns of establishing Morrison as a lady. The murder took place in the South and in a state that apparently had "an unwritten law" that would not allow a woman to be executed. Morrison was traveling with a northern theater company, a fact that intensified the need for southerners to confirm her background and character. Her past was critical in establishing how she fit into this unwritten formula for females on trial in Tennessee. Her background would prove critical in establishing this woman as a lady of a class high enough to make sense of her and her husband's problems with the theater company and her eventual acquittal of a first-degree murder charge. Her background could also explain why Morrison and James were even involved with a theater company to begin with if they felt that these people were beneath them socially.

In order to learn more about the couple, the *Chattanooga Daily Times* wrote to the editor of the *Lafayette Advertiser* in Louisiana asking about the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. James and their life in the city. The newspaper wrote back that Mr. James had come to Lafayette as a stranger but found a job as a pharmacist "where by his unlimited knowledge and pleasant manners he soon became a favorite with the trading public." Miss Morrison was reported to have arrived in the city in May of 1898 and married Mr. James the next day. Married by a Reverend Reams, the couple received wedding visitors that included "gentleman of high standing in the community." The bride was reported as being a "writer on fashion and short stories well known east." Her father was reported as deceased but had owned a steamship line between New Orleans and Liverpool, England, and was originally from Louisville, Kentucky. The couple lived in

Lafayette for a year, staying in boarding houses or with local families. The reporter was very insistent on the good character of the couple and of Morrison: “All who came in contact with Mrs. James speak highly of her as a cultured lady, good company and entertain the highest admiration for her.” Claiming that she was not seen in public very often and that most of her time was spent writing, the reporter concluded, “Both of them commanded the respect of the community, their lives being above reproach. ... Everyone who came in contact with Mrs. James found her to be kind and sometimes much to excess.”⁶¹ Since the couple was traveling with a theater company from the North, establishing Morrison as a lady within the context of another southern state and in a context outside of the theater company was critical in confirming Chattanooga’s perception of her status.

Morrison and James had a personal disdain concerning people in the theater, but Lois Banner argues that “by the 1870s an opera house was a common symbol of community pride and modernity in the burgeoning towns and cities of the industrializing nation.” Journalism through the 1880s and 1890s also focused on the news and gossip surrounding the theater and its celebrities. Banner also argues that individual actresses gave their fans a variety of types of women for their fans to emulate.⁶² The *Chattanooga Daily Times* first printed Morrison’s picture two days after the murder on September 24 on the front page of the paper. The caption read, “Julia Morrison: Leading Lady of ‘Mr. Plaster of Paris’ Company, the Slayer of Actor Frank Leiden.” In the picture, Morrison is clasping her hands in front of her chest while looking upward in what appears to be a moment of musing. Her hair is shoulder length with long curls,

⁶¹ “Miss Julia Morrison,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, October 10, 1899, 8.

⁶² Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 178-180.

and her dress is ornamented but not elaborate.⁶³ Combined with the caption, the picture provides the image of a woman beyond the sensationalism and drama of the murder. Though a “slayer,” Morrison remained a lady.

Over three months later when the case finally went to trial in January of 1900, the *Nashville Banner* ran a picture of Morrison in “street costume” in which she wore a large, voluminous hat with a full collared wrap around her.⁶⁴ In her examination of the styles of working women Nan Enstad contends, “By appropriating and exaggerating the accoutrements of ladyhood, working women invested the category of lady with great imaginative value, implicitly challenging dominant meanings and filling the category with their own flamboyant practices.” These women adopted a style that was hyper-feminine in order to compensate for the masculine work they performed. Oftentimes, large and overly flowered hats embodied that style, like the one donned by Morrison in the *Nashville Banner* article. Women like Morrison used “ladyhood” to balance the masculine version of women in the working class, giving them a “differently gendered class identity.”⁶⁵ Therefore, Morrison was carefully crafting herself as a lady in the midst of working-class women and men, and James re-enforced her assertion of ladyhood by the arguments he made for accompanying his wife with the theater company.

⁶³ “Trial of Miss Morrison Continued,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 24, 1899, 4.

⁶⁴ “People Thronged the Court-Room,” *Nashville Banner*, January 10, 1900, 8.

⁶⁵ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 78, 82.

Chapter 6

Class and Ladyhood

As the Opera House manager Mr. Albert's son concluded in 1933, two of the main factors contributing to Morrison's acquittal were the fact that she was a "handsome woman" and the influence of her "sob sisters." Though the murder was obviously premeditated, Morrison's ladyhood saved her. A lady in the South could not directly murder someone. She could not be guilty because she was a lady. The turn of the century witnessed a transition in the perception of individual identity. The importance of character in the nineteenth century, for example, was overshadowed in the twentieth century by the importance of personality. The formation of character was the key to an individual's success. By the turn of the century personality was what brought one success. Notions of ladyhood also changed in this transformation from the importance of character to the importance of personality in one's success and perception in life. The "character ethic" of the late nineteenth century declined with the rise of industrialization and modern society. Success was justified by the notion that a higher power rewarded those who worked hard and those who were disciplined received material rewards that did not contradict the beliefs of a proper Protestant worldview. Instead of placing faith in a higher being, people began to place their faith in themselves and their own "magnetism" in order to ensure success.⁶⁶

Karen Halttunen argues that the most important element in this transition from character to personality was the replacement of the influence of the individual entrepreneur by the influence of the white-collar middle class. Referring to the nineteenth century as "sentimental America," she contends that the by late in the century a "new success formula" had emerged and

⁶⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 206-7.

that the main skill in this formula was “the art of social manipulation.”⁶⁷ Though Halttunen’s work focuses on the emergence of the “confidence man” in the nineteenth century, her analysis of “social manipulation” here is critical to understanding how Morrison and Leiden were able to center their relationship with the theater company and Morrison’s relationship with Leiden along class lines. More importantly, Chattanooga’s perception of Morrison as a lady was essentially a product of social manipulation, an act that Morrison failed to continue after her acquittal. She constructed herself as a lady in opposition to the theater company; based her issues with Leiden and the company on her status as a lady; and received a non-guilty verdict for first-degree murder because she was lady. She compromised her ladyhood, though, after she received her acquittal and gave a speech of thanks to the jury and then immediately announced her plans to lecture. Not only was the murder of Leiden premeditated but so were her plans for the lecture. Her confidence in receiving an acquittal was so high that she had already packed her belongings and begun to compose “The Other Side of Stage Life.”

In her work on gender and Jim Crow in North Carolina, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore initially explores what she calls the caste system of the South at the turn of the century. This system “in which skin color, class, and gender dictated the pattern of every daily interaction” dominated southern life. In her work, she uses this system to make sense of how the progress of blacks in the South threatened what southerners conceptualized as “place.” Everyone in the South had his or her place that Gilmore refers to as “a stiff-sided box.”⁶⁸ She is writing of about

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

the relationship between blacks and whites in the South in the first decades of legalized segregation; however, her notions of “place” in the South transfer to the notions of ladyhood and the connection of class and gender in cities such as Chattanooga. Certain women had certain places in society. Even though she was a member of a theater company, Morrison had cultivated and manipulated her perception by society as a lady. The aftermath of Morrison’s case caused Chattanooga to reevaluate how it thought of ladyhood. During the transition from the nineteenth-century emphasis on character to the twentieth-century emphasis on personality, Morrison’s case embodied that change.

Before the fall from her status as a lady the *Times* headed Morrison’s first interview with the press, “Woman Who Committed the Murder Says She Had Been Mistreated, and Often Insulted – Driven to Desperation.” Morrison claimed that she was in “an excited state of mind, bordering on insanity” when she murdered Leiden. Jealousy, she claimed, was the direct cause of the murder, claiming that the company had taunted her and driven her to murder. The reporter described her as “a large, robust and exceedingly handsome woman, weighing perhaps 180 pounds” and that she was “a decided blonde, with heavy waving hair and large deep blue eyes.” Furthermore, she had a “pleasant address and manners and would not impress a person as being either quarrelsome or dangerous.” The reporter concluded that “her general demeanor would lead one to the conclusion that she is a perfect lady, with a keen sense of self-respect” and “appears to be modest and of an agreeable and amiable disposition.” To the *Times* reporter she did not appear to be a woman who was naturally capable of murder.⁶⁹ A lady could not commit murder if she was of sound mind and body at the time of the murder.

⁶⁹ “Frank Leiden, Actor, Shot By Woman,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 23, 1899, 1.

Morrison claimed that Leiden had abused her and that he and the rest of the company had been attempting to have her husband leave the company so that she “would be without protection” and “alone with this stage manager” who had been treating her in a “shameful manner.” She had even requested on the morning of the murder that he begin addressing her as a lady and that Leiden had replied that if he thought she was a lady then he would treat her as such. Claiming verbal and physical abuse from Leiden, Morrison said that she had been treated “like a dog” and that he had threatened her life the night before the murder in Knoxville. On the night of the murder he had told her that if she would just kiss him then he would not bother her anymore. At her refusal, he became “enraged” and used language that Morrison would not repeat to reporters.⁷⁰

The newspaper interviews with Morrison and James repeatedly emphasized the aspect of class in order to distinguish the couple from the theater company. Morrison’s sex was an issue because a female had committed murder, as Monkkonen demonstrates. Her gender was an issue to the people of Chattanooga because the newspaper accounts established her as a lady. A lady, more than just any female, in the South could not be convicted of murder. Regardless of Morrison and Leiden’s story, from their initial involvement with the company through the murder trial, the newspaper created a text for the case that focused on Morrison and Leiden’s class in order to emphasize notions of justice in the South. The newspaper also focused on the appearance of the couple in order to establish Morrison as a lady. The descriptions of Morrison also reveal a woman whose appearance is more in vogue with nineteenth-century styles of dress than those emerging at the turn of the century.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

As Lois Banner argues, after the Civil War a more buxom and heavier figure on a female was considered the “model of beauty.” By the 1890s the tall and athletic build of the Gibson Girl was more in vogue than the postwar figure. Banner argues, “Why such changes in the standards of beauty occurred is a complex issue in the interaction of class, women’s changing expectations, social modernization, medical points of view, and other factors.”⁷¹ All of these elements are displayed in the case of Julia Morrison. Chattanooga would more willingly embrace the image of Morrison as a voluptuous woman than the vogue Gibson Girl because they were still embracing nineteenth-century notions of beauty. Focusing on her appearance also allowed the newspaper to keep its readers focused on the “abuse” she suffered from Leiden, further justifying her innocence. Banner writes that what concerns her the most “about fashion and physical appearance is how they interact with other social and cultural events and institutions and particularly what they tell us about changing behavior over time.”⁷² In the case of Morrison, her appearance and choice of dress and Chattanooga acceptance of this look reveals that they were more willing to embrace an older and less fashionable female as innocent than a woman who looked more like a Gibson Girl.

⁷¹ Banner, 5.

⁷² Banner, 7.

Chapter 7

The Verdict

“JULIA MORRISON JAMES A FREE WOMAN!” On January 10, 1900, the jury foreman read the verdict of “not guilty” to a packed courtroom where “great throngs” had gathered to witness the “conclusion of the famous trial.” After two minutes of deliberation, the jury had freed Julia Morrison and ended the trial “upon which the eyes of the people of the entire country had been for days past.” Once read, thunderous applause erupted in the packed courtroom of men and women. The *Times* reported, “Ladies stood on chairs, waved their handkerchiefs and cried. Men vied each other to get close enough to grasp the former prisoner’s hand.” In contrast, Morrison quietly smiled and “looked as if a great load had been lifted from her mind.” Once the excitement had begun to decline, Morrison’s attorney led her to the stand from which she delivered a brief speech to the packed courtroom. She thanked the judge and the jury for their “just and generous decision” and wished that God would be as merciful on them as they had been to her. She also thanked her attorneys while forgiving the prosecution “for their strenuous efforts” towards her conviction. To her persecutors, she left them to “their conscience and their God.” In closing she stated to Leiden’s sister, “To the poor, betrayed sister. I say that God knows were it in my power to restore her brother, I would certainly do so.” She then cried and the crowd clamored again to touch her hand. A crowd of over five-hundred had filled the courtroom and spilled out on the lawn of the courthouse and jail and onto Walnut Street which was “one solid mass of humanity.”⁷³

⁷³ “Julia Morrison James A Free Woman!,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 11, 1900, 5.

Morrison did not announce any future plans except that she would remain in Chattanooga long enough to give a lecture entitled “The Other Side of Stage Life.” Apparently, she had felt “so confident” in being acquitted that she had packed all of her things before leaving the jail that morning and prepared to announce an upcoming lecture. She and James were as “happy as two larks.” The *Times* continued to report on the immediate recovery of Morrison and James by commenting on the two canary birds that Morrison had apparently kept with her in her cell during her three-month stay in the Chattanooga jail, two of her “favorite belongings.” Telegrams of congratulations from across the country, including New York, Atlanta, and Chicago, began to arrive shortly after the jury announced the verdict. The *Times* claimed that “the verdict itself was the theme of discussion around every tea table, in every boarding house, in every public place and on every street corner.” At the same time, however, the public opinion that had once been vocally unified behind Morrison’s innocence began to divide. “Public sentiment” remained “largely on the side of the acquitted” but some began expressing their concern that there had been “a miscarriage of justice.” The jury acquitted Morrison on the grounds of “self-defense and emotional insanity.” The first jurymen to suggest an acquittal was a Mr. Henderson who was believed to support a “strict construction of law.” The jury’s decision was unanimous with the exception of a Mr. Fuller who said he was only initially opposed to the acquittal “because the defendant didn’t kill the deceased sooner.”⁷⁴

Despite the quick and unanimous decision of acquitting Morrison, other comments from the jurymen correlated with the emerging public opinion that there had been a miscarriage of justice. The *Times* reported Mr. Henderson as saying, “Under the evidence in the case we could

⁷⁴ Ibid.

do nothing but acquit. I would have for conviction had there been any evidence to warrant it, but couldn't see how I could." Henderson's comment implies that the jury did not consider Morrison's confessed, witnessed, and premeditated murder of Leiden "evidence." The defense's case of temporary insanity brought on by the harassments of Leiden and those of the theater company proved to be the stronger set of evidence in Morrison's trial. In his closing statements before the jury adjourned to reach a verdict Colonel Clift proclaimed that Leiden had brought his fate upon himself and that Morrison had been criticized "heartlessly, unjustly" and "willfully." He continued to outline Leiden's abuse and harassment of Morrison throughout her time with the company and asked the jury who would have not done what she did given the circumstances? Her life was threatened, so she took his life. He also asked, "There can you put your finger anywhere upon her conduct as a witness or as a woman that is not lady-like and pure?" He concluded by asking the jury, "...place your daughter in this woman's place, constantly pursued by men of this character. You have a right to do that. Then think what you would think should she need a protecting hand."⁷⁵ The "evidence" was essentially the fact that Morrison was a lady and little else mattered if the defense could prove that point.

The *Times* concluded its coverage of the case from the tenth of January by reporting a fund that was raised on Morrison's behalf but that had been abandoned for fear "that the motive would be misunderstood by the public." Finally, the owners of a local laundry and dye business announced that all of the jury members responsible for the acquittal of Morrison would one week of free laundry service beginning on Monday, January 14.⁷⁶ These offers were most likely made in anticipation of Morrison's acquittal and before she actually received and responded to the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

verdict. Chattanoogaans were in full support of her acquittal prior to her closing speech and the announcement of her lecture.

The initial stirrings of discomfort with the verdict mentioned among some Chattanoogaans in the paper the day after the acquittal were solidified in the Friday, January 12, edition that headlined an article, “A Fair Test of Public Sentiment in the Morrison Murder Case.” The reporter claimed to have interviewed two-hundred and fifteen citizens of the city in order to find out what the people of Chattanooga really thought about the verdict and address their “mooted questions.” The results of the interviews showed that seventy percent of those interviewed felt that she should have received some sort of punishment, and thirty percent were in complete agreement with the jury’s verdict. The purpose of the interviews was to reinforce the paper’s prior claims that “public opinion was decidedly favorable to the acquittal of the woman, and it was this sentiment in the atmosphere that brought the verdict about.” The article concluded that there was “tension in the public mind...wrought in the celebrated case.”⁷⁷

This “tension” continued to receive press coverage over the weekend as the Sunday edition of the *Times* announced that Morrison had so far been unable to find a place in “this city” in which to give her lecture “The Other Side of Stage Life.” The event would most likely take place in the “Auditorium” as her supporters were doing everything they could to make sure that her lecture took place. Others in Chattanooga did not feel the same way about Morrison. The *Times* did not print many letters of opinion, if there were any, prior to the end of the trial with the exception of the “Southern Man” already mentioned. The daily papers following the announcement of her acquittal, however, were filled with letters of the opinion that Morrison at

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

least deserved some punishment. The *Times* printed letters from across the state and region and from Chattanooga that did not reflect the sympathy Morrison received prior to her acquittal. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* was adamant that the reason for her acquittal laid in the fact that she was a female and the jury was composed of all males. Claiming that a jury of all women would have convicted her, the newspapers claimed, “Her sex saved her from the gallows; the absence of any proper place of confinement saved her from being immured.” The writer goes on to criticize Morrison for not be grateful enough to those who saved her, for her arrogance of giving a speech about the “dark side” of life in the theater, and for her exploitation of the theater for her own means. The *Appeal* continued to criticize Morrison by writing, “If the stage is so bad it is not easy to see how Miss Morrison can be good.”⁷⁸

Perhaps one of the most succinct statements pointing out the contradiction of Morrison as a lady and her career choice, this last piece of criticism illustrates the public’s reevaluation of the meaning of ladyhood after the trial. Prior to her acquittal, Morrison was the recipient of much sympathy and reassurance that she would not be found guilty. The actual verdict, though, instigated a shift in the public response to the case. The issue that the *Appeal* had with the verdict was not the verdict itself, “Owing to her sex we have no war to make with her acquittal....” The problem the paper had was with the way in which a person of “refinement” conducted herself after the trial.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ “A Fair Test Of Public Sentiment In The Morrison Case,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 12,1900, 5.

⁷⁹ “The Julia Morrison Case Aftermath,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 14,1900, 5.

The *Nashville Banner* was not so much critical of Morrison but of Chattanooga. In describing the cheering crowds after the jury announced its non-guilty verdict, the *Banner* wrote, “Unthinking Chattanooga, sentimental Chattanooga, went wild with joy.” The paper did acknowledge that “serious” and “thinking” Chattanoogaans did look on in confusion at the spectacle. The article concluded with a criticism of the *Chattanooga Daily Times*, “Quite in contrast with these delirious demonstrations is the tone of a sober press commenting upon the strange exhibition.” Though criticizing Chattanooga and its press, the *Banner* was indirectly questioning the sensationalism of the Morrison case, Morrison herself, and the verdict.⁸⁰

Augusta, Georgia’s *Chronicle* echoed the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* in its criticism of Morrison’s plans to lecture to the city about stage life now that she was freed. The paper concluded, “The public may be ready for the spectacular and the notorious on the stage, but not on the lecture platform.”⁸¹ The paper from Greenville, South Carolina, was similar in its astonishment at Morrison’s proposed lecture. Accusing her of turning “homicide into gate money,” the paper projected that Chattanoogaans would “politely but firmly” not attend her lecture. Noting that “womanhood has certain privileges and exemptions in this country,” the paper accused Morrison of stretching those points in her case and warned her, “But don’t – don’t – don’t – come fresh from the dock of a murder trial to lecture to us. That is a little too strong a demand on our tolerance.”⁸²

The final comments from regional newspapers came from the *Huntsville Mercury*. The *Mercury* proclaimed that she was not insane and questioned whether the plea of insanity of the murder was justifiable. After a snide comment about her lecture, the paper concluded, “If the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Chattanooga jury had been given a few minutes for a sober second thought they would have based their action upon the fact that Miss Morrison was a woman – a much better reason for releasing her than the ones given.” These opinions from regional newspapers about Chattanooga and the Morrison case reveal both the changing perception of ladyhood at this time in the South and the changing perceptions of which, as the Greenville paper stated, “privileges and exemptions” came with the title of lady. All the newspapers were in agreement that it was acceptable for the jury to acquit Morrison since she was a female but that the grounds on which they did so and her plans for giving a lecture on the theater were not one of the privileges of ladyhood.⁸³

The *Chattanooga Daily Times* concluded its coverage of Morrison for the day with an extensive letter to the paper about Morrison, her acquittal, and her lecture by “Just A Girl.” The writer condemned the acquittal, the speech given by Morrison at the end of the trial, and her audacity of having a lecture planned before receiving the verdict. She concluded, “My verdict would be a good spanking and exile to some other community where man-killing is more favorably received.”⁸⁴ The issue was not so much with the murder, the trial, or the verdict but the way in which Morrison behaved throughout and after them. She was revered and saved because she was a lady, but after her final statements in court and her announcement of a lecture, the public that had once sympathized with her turned against her. Morrison’s behavior challenged traditional notions of ladyhood and caused Chattanooga, and southerners outside of the city, to reevaluate what constituted a lady and how they had let this woman pass through the judicial system as a lady.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The final response to the murder in the *Chattanooga Daily Times* was entitled “Julia Morrison Case From the Pulpit” in the issue from Monday, January 15, 1900. Throughout the final day of the trial and the public responses to the verdict, references to God pervaded the text of the newspapers, both from Morrison and the public that had supported and now condemned her. In Reverend Doctor Brougher’s sermon he took issue with Morrison’s planned lecture. Similar to the statements made by regional newspapers, the Reverend told the *Times*, “I sometimes feel that I could forgive the jury for rendering the verdict they did, if she had not brazenly taken advantage of the notoriety the trial gave her as an advertisement and signified her intention of going on the lecture platform.” Several more statements from Chattanooga and nearby newspapers finished the article and completed the *Times*’s coverage of the case. Their issues continued to be centered on the planned lecture of Morrison’s and her behavior concerning her acquittal. She had not behaved as a lady should after so graciously being found not guilty for a murder that she was obviously guilty of committing. The most biting of the final statements came from the *Washington Post*: “Chattanooga, Tenn., offers extraordinary inducements to sensationally inclined young women who are disposed to add murder to their repertoires.”⁸⁵

Giving the *Post*’s statement a belated element of prophecy, thirteen years after Morrison’s case on March 15, 1913, in the town of Gallatin, Tennessee, outside of Nashville Mrs. Anna Dotson murdered the local barber, Charlie Cobb, in his barbershop in the middle of the afternoon. She fired four shots at her victim without speaking a word in the middle of the crowded shop. The next day the *Nashville Tennessean* and the *Nashville American* headlined with the words “WOMAN SUFFRAGE – SENSATIONAL KILLING.” Like Morrison, Dotson killed calmly and only broke down emotionally when telling her story to the press. Dotson killed

⁸⁵ “Julia Morrison Case From The Pulpit,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 15, 1900, 5.

for different reasons. Anna Dotson reported to the newspapers that she and Charlie Cobb had been having an affair and had made plans to leave Nashville together. Dotson told the papers that she killed Cobb because she “knew that something had to be done or someone else would suffer besides myself.” She was afraid that her brother or her husband would kill Cobb or that Cobb would kill her husband for she had confessed to him about the affair.⁸⁶ By March 18, the same newspaper headlined with the words “INDICT COBB’S SLAYER” and reported Dotson indicted on the charge of first degree murder with her trial date set for May 20. Like Morrison, the defense claimed that Dotson was insane and hoped for a non-guilty verdict.⁸⁷ If the jury found her guilty for murder in the first degree then she would have spend the rest of her life in prison or be executed by hanging. When Judge Neill delivered the jury’s verdict the courtroom went wild. They had found her guilty of “involuntary manslaughter” and had sentenced her to five days in the county’s workhouse.⁸⁸

There was both public approval and disagreement about the verdict. The first and most astonishing reaction came from Judge Neil himself for he had asked to jury to first consider her sanity at the time of the killing and to consider the consequences of charging her with first degree murder if she was not found insane. He never mentioned the option of charging Dotson with involuntary manslaughter. The jury had both ignored and modified his instructions, an anomaly in his court or any court at the time. After the trial, Judge Neil called the verdict a “miscarriage of justice” in an interview with the press. Apparently, six of the jurors were convinced of her sanity and the other six convinced of her insanity, and neither of the two sides would change its minds. The twelve men were in agreement that the murder had been

⁸⁶ Kip Gayden, *Miscarriage of Justice* (New York, Boston, Nashville: Center Street, 2008), 241-3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 257-8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 310, 316-7.

premeditated but remained firmly divided on how Anna Dotson should be punished. Their decision hinged on the emerging suffragist movement at the time. How could a jury of twelve men determine the fate of a woman who was not even allowed to serve on a jury? Women were not even allowed to participate in deciding the fate of “one of their own.” Anna Dotson was essentially set free because her defense attorneys had made women’s rights a part of her case and successfully secured the idea of female equality in the minds of the jurors.⁸⁹

Dotson’s murder of Cobb occurred during a nationwide campaign for female suffrage before World War I overshadowed the fight for voting rights. The author Kip Gayden writes, “...the verdict jolted conventional thinking anchored in the Victorian past.” Many of those who observed the trial felt as Judge Neil did, that this was a miscarriage of justice, and others thought the verdict fair. Public opinion, like that of the jury, was almost equally divided. Gayden concludes his exploration of the case by noting that the narrow margins of opinion from the jury and the public were “akin to the one-vote margin of victory for the suffrage movement in Tennessee” that was responsible for the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution that gave women the right to vote.⁹⁰ Since Morrison’s trial in 1900 and the change in the public’s opinion of her from one of sympathy to scorn, Tennesseans continued to reevaluate ladyhood and how justice should account for gender and class.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 318-22.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 330.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Dotson's case occurred over a decade after Julia Morrison was acquitted by an all-male jury in the same state. The murder of Freda Mitchell by Alice Ward occurred in 1892 in Memphis, Tennessee. Ward was found not guilty and incurably insane. Taken together the three murders can set the Morrison-Leiden murder in a broader light. Though they spanned three decades and three different cities, each case occurred in Tennessee. The main difference between the Mitchell-Ward murder and the Morrison-Leiden murder was the sex of the victims. The main difference between the Morrison-Leiden murder and the Dotson-Cobb murder was that Morrison did not concede to any of Leiden's supposed advances and Dotson and Cobb were having an affair. All three murders were committed by women. All three murders were also essentially about gender roles in the turn of the century. Though the sex of the victims varied and the circumstances leading to the murders were different, all three of the murders occurred because of contested gender roles. Mitchell murdered Ward because she no longer wanted to pass as a heterosexual couple with Ward. Morrison and Leiden clashed because she would not submit to his harassment or advances as she asserted her status as a lady. Dotson murdered Cobb in order to put an end to their affair before her husband or her brother could murder for her.

The most discernable difference between the three murders lies in the years in which they were committed and what society perceived as a lady in each of those years. The Mitchell-Ward murder's complexity surpasses the other two in that it could have taken place with the same results in 1892 as in 1913. Lesbianism was entering the American vernacular by the 1910s but would not be so established in Tennessee to warrant much change from the views held in the

early 1890s and those held in the early 1910s. The Mitchell-Ward case could have quite likely turned out the same way in the year as the Dotson-Cobb murder. The Morrison-Leiden murder occurred at a more intriguing moment due to the murder occurring in the nineteenth century and the trial occurring in the twentieth century. The issue of Morrison's class and ladyhood also distinguished the case from the other two. Gender was an essential part in conceptualizing ladyhood, but ladyhood was also very much a part of class distinctions. The Dotson-Cobb murder belonged to a different time, one in which the idea of women's suffrage was more alive after the more prominent social causes involving African Americans in the New South and the social reform movements of the turn of the century and before the nation's involvement World War I. Dotson was found guilty and only punished with five days of hard labor, thus symbolizing a shift in the relationship between gender and justice and in southern society's conceptualization of ladyhood.

Morrison's case can serve as a microcosm of the tensions present at the turn of the century involving gender and justice. The modernity of the twentieth century was a contested issue for Chattanooga at the time of the murder and the trial. After her acquittal, Morrison had planned on giving a lecture, but by then her "sob sisters" had abandoned her and begun to rethink what it meant to be a lady in the twentieth century. They had seen her through her time in jail and her time in court, but after the final verdict Morrison returned to the anonymous status with which she had entered the city. She did leave behind a society reevaluating how they perceived ladyhood and conceptualized the notion of lady. Morrison challenged traditional notions of ladyhood and served as a liminal figure in Chattanooga's perceptions of what constituted a lady.

The examination of Morrison's case given here is just one way of using the case to look at the city of Chattanooga and the South at this time. A more extensive project could possibly uncover more sources than that of the Opera House manager's son's scrapbook and notes and find correspondence or diaries that provide more insight into public opinion than that expressed in the *Chattanooga Daily Times*. Unfortunately, archives concerning Chattanooga contain a gap for research pertaining to the turn of the century. Morrison's case could also be used as one of many events that occurred in Chattanooga during that year to reveal more transitions in the city that occurred as the country moved from one century to the next. There is still more that could be said about the case itself, but, as mentioned earlier, the sources are not accessible given the scope of this project, or they do not exist. The Chattanooga newspaper failed to ever make complete sense of Morrison, James, and Leiden. A project that could yield sources concerning the couple and the theater company might produce a work such as Gayden's on the Dotson-Cobb murder.

Morrison's story could also be used as Trotti uses the murder of Fannie Lillian Madison by Thomas Cluverius. An examination of other murders in Chattanooga and their press coverage in addition to that of Morrison's could use the city as Trotti uses Richmond. Julia Morrison's story could also be used in the way that Cohen uses Helen Jewett but that examination would involve looking at the case from the point of view of who was murdered, Frank Leiden, and not the murderess. Julia Morrison as a murderess is where the importance of the case is found, and it is through that distinction that Chattanooga can serve as representative of other southern cities in the New South. Including the other two murderesses in Tennessee from sequential decades allows for the murder and the trial to take on a larger significance in making sense of this one piece in the larger transition in the southern conceptualization of ladyhood at the turn of the century.

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