

6 **Constructing the Cult of the Criminal: Kate Webster – Victorian Murderess and Media Sensation.**

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I

It is difficult to account for the differences in the amount of interest displayed with regard to murders. The body of a murdered person is found one day stabbed to the heart, and all England is convulsed by the intelligence, “latest particulars” are given by the papers, and eagerly devoured by the public, a large reward is offered by Government for the discovery of the murderer, and all Scotland-yard is on the alert. The body of another murdered person is found the next day with the skull fractured, and little or no notice is taken of the circumstance. The evidence given at the inquest appears in an obscure corner of the daily journals, under the head of “Death under suspicious circumstances”, the jury return an open verdict, no reward is offered by Government, the body is, perhaps, never identified, but is buried in a nameless grave, and there is the end of the matter.¹

It is evident, not least from the other chapters in this volume that micro-histories regularly tell us much about criminals, the crimes they perpetrate and their context. Yet, micro-histories can also shed light on both authoritative reactions to illegality and more popular or customary attitudes to its committal. This chapter explores the latter perspective, whilst concerned with the origins of the intense and widespread fascination with homicide. This has seemingly widened its reach to such an extent (and at such alarming speed) that present day social commentators have been at

pains to point out the threat that it poses to modern, civilised society. Scholars have firmly situated the enduring zenith of this unhealthy obsession in the modern era, suggesting the last three decades of the twentieth century established what we could call 'the cult of the criminal'. Certainly the paroxysm and proliferation of multiple murderers (latterly defined as serial killers) stimulated the media's attention from that time onwards. Yet, there is now evidence to suggest that the origins of this 'cult of the criminal' emerge earlier than the 1970s. Indeed our preoccupation with murder had already assumed powerful proportions long before some of the infamous (official) first-wave serial killers (such as Ted Bundy, Edmund Kemper, Peter Sutcliffe or Dennis Nilsen) were even born. For instance, historians such as Judith Flanders, Rosalind Crone and Lucy Worsley have compellingly argued that the Victorian popular fascination for murder was just as pervasive as in contemporary times.² Indeed, the only real difference between the two eras lies in the development of new media technologies from the late twentieth century onwards, which have enabled this fascination to reach a wider, global audience more rapidly than in earlier periods.

Whilst we can acknowledge the importance of the Victorian era in establishing the 'cult of the criminal' what is even more interesting for the purposes of this chapter, is that our obsession with murder and fatal interpersonal violence has been somewhat selective. Evidently throughout history, some murders have fascinated more than others. Certainly, the opening quote to this chapter, from 1871, suggests this same selectivity was at play during the Victorian era. Indeed according to the author of these same editorial notes, some murders were deemed 'fashionable' and others 'unfashionable', but why was this the case? Scholars of modern criminality have tried to identify the triggers or elements of homicide cases that make them especially

interesting to popular audiences in the present day. But can these prompts also apply to Victorian predilections and to what extent can micro-histories help us to uncover the subjectivity of the 'cult of the criminal' and its subsequent evolution?

This chapter uses a detailed micro-history of the notorious case of Katherine (Kate) Webster, an Irishwoman living in the London borough of Richmond indicted for the murder of her mistress, Mrs Julia Martha Thomas, at the Old Bailey in 1879. Through analysing media reactions to the courtroom evidence and the portrayal of Webster in the extensive press coverage that ensued, this chapter displays the aspects of this case that fascinated the Victorian populace and assesses why this particular homicide attracted so much attention for so long. According to one scholar, the Webster case achieved '...a dark immortality'³ in the annals of crime, but were the reasons for its prolonged infamy the same as those suggested by scholars for the more modern era? In addition, what does this micro-history tell us about female homicidal activity and how it was regarded during the Victorian period – an era where prevailing gender ideologies encouraged the populace to instinctively recoil from female violence?

II

Historians, criminologists and sociologists have recognised the existence of a cultural obsession with violence and with homicide in particular, during the modern era. The United States of America has seemingly led the way with this, but other developed societies display an evident preoccupation with violence and the violent too, including Great Britain.⁴ Mark Seltzer explains the allure of fatal violence as being symptomatic of a 'wound culture' which is a '...public fascination with torn and

open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound.⁵ Society is thus attracted to 'the atrocity exhibition' where individuals '...wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories.'⁶ The media's overblown attention to the crimes of multiple murderers since the 1970s has broadened and accelerated reverence for this 'wound culture' so that murderers routinely become celebrities and evidence of their crimes becomes memorabilia for collection.⁷ Arguably then, a 'market for murder' was cultivated by popular interest in some of the most vicious, brutal and repugnant episodes to have occurred in criminal history.⁸ Indeed, one derivative of this is the phenomenon of 'dark tourism' with individuals and groups touring places associated with death and suffering, including murder sites and locations associated with famous killers.⁹

Although modern society's fascination with the 'cult of the criminal' seems unrelentingly ubiquitous, closer analysis reveals our obsession is more qualified and discerning. Not all murders are deemed newsworthy, nor all murderers infamous. Indeed, analysing a compendium of micro-histories and case-studies led criminologists such as Yvonne Jewkes and David Wilson to argue for twelve criteria by which we can gauge the potential for public interest generated by a given true crime story. These are (1) **Threshold** (the perceived importance of the event in a global, national or local context); (2) **Predictability** (the more novel or unusual a crime, the more interesting it seems); (3) **Simplification** (the need for criminal episodes to be relatively comprehensible); (4) **Individualism** (the need for crime stories to have human interest elements so that can be readily identified with); (5) **Risk** (interest is seemingly greater in a crime if the offender is unknown or is at large); (6) **Sex** (crime stories involving sex and violence generate more interest than

those without such elements); (7) **Celebrity** (even if a crime is mundane in content it generates interest if a well-known person is connected to the events); (8) **Proximity** (a crime story will generate interest if it has spatially and cultural relevance to its audience); (9) **Violence** (the most important trigger for the newsworthiness of a criminal episode is whether violence is evident or not); (10) **Visual Spectacle** (in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, graphic imagery is crucial for a crime story to be memorable and attain longevity of interest); (11) **Children** (crime stories are effectively guaranteed extensive media exposure if they feature children as victims or offenders); and (12) **Conservative Ideology and Political Diversion** (criminal episodes which transgress social norms and challenge conservative attitudes are typically newsworthy).¹⁰

Whilst David Wilson applauds Jewkes' attempts to offer a theoretical foundation for the study of popular fascination with particular offences and offenders, he argues that her criteria are not comprehensive, nor are they unproblematic. First, he argues that a crescendo of publicity is often associated with a criminal in the run up to their prosecution enabling their notoriety. Second and arguably linked to this preliminary point, if an offender is assigned a nickname by the media, their criminal exploits more readily achieve prominent news coverage. Third, Wilson suggests that crimes committed in the north of Britain are not as widely reported on as crimes committed in the south, regardless of the levels of brutality involved. Moreover, if the crime scenes are perceivably linked to lower social class, they will not attain as much publicity as incidents elsewhere. Wilson also argues that seemingly motiveless crimes are harder for the public to engage with than those where cause is more evident. Finally, he argues that criminal cases with extensive and varied witness

testimony are far likely to achieve notoriety than instances where the public voice is absent, even if the crime itself was brutal, bloody or baffling.¹¹

Arguably, Jewkes and Wilson are not that far apart in identifying the triggers which determine whether a given crime or criminal will grab the headlines in modern Britain. Yet their scholarship also reveals that what generates popular interest is not fixed or stable. Rather, our fascination with the 'cult of crime' depends on the specific circumstances of a given case and its context. Our predilections in this respect evidently change over time as that context evolves and is reshaped by social, cultural, economic and political events. But can this fascination with crime (and with murderous violence in particular) be traced back to earlier periods and does the contemporary fascination with murderous violence, apply to popular audiences prior to 1900?

III

Certainly, an interest in death and suffering had been evident in Britain since the eighteenth century, when huge crowds gathered to witness public executions and individuals purchased the penitent confessions of condemned felons.¹² Yet, by the nineteenth century, the popular appetite for stories of murder had seemingly become voracious. Richard D. Altick argues that 'It was in, or just before, the early Victorian era that homicide first became institutionalised as a popular entertainment, a spectator sport.'¹³ Moreover, this passion for murder and the macabre was projected like a '...crimson thread that [ran] through the fabric of Victorian society' as it was a passion shared by all individuals regardless of social class.¹⁴ The emergence of new journalism coupled with a glut of sensational murder cases in the mid Victorian era

both focussed the critical spotlight of social and moral commentators on deviance and illegality for political effect. Collectively, all of these factors cemented a fascination for homicide in the Victorian consciousness.¹⁵

Michel Foucault has suggested that a new category of 'dangerous individual' emerged to thrill and threaten Victorian society in equal measure.¹⁶ This shift is evident in newspaper reportage from the period as journalists provided detailed information regarding offenders *and* their offences.¹⁷ Arguably, the addition of this personal dimension to the retelling of Victorian murders, alongside the broad circulation of considerable detail regarding specific murderous episodes, enabled Victorian audiences to be more readily enthralled by fatal violence than their forebears. Arguably then, the nineteenth century marks the real *origins* of the long-standing obsession with 'the cult of the criminal' in Great Britain and may even mark the early *zenith* of this preoccupation.

Although the homicide rate was in substantial decline during the nineteenth century, Victorians found murder endlessly fascinating nonetheless.¹⁸ For instance, a typical homicide trial during the Victorian period could result in around 500,000 copies of the trial proceedings being produced by London printers alone. Particular episodes could generate much greater circulation figures, with one mid-century murder case necessitating the production of over 1,650,000 broadside pamphlets.¹⁹ The 'market for murder' during this period was also evident in the number of plays, peep shows, puppet shows, waxwork exhibitions, ballads and novels inspired by contemporary homicide cases and available for consumers to buy or view at reasonable prices.²⁰ Moreover, early 'dark tourism' in the shape of 'murder-sightseeing' became a popular

past-time long before the 1970s and the artefacts and evidence associated with famous criminal trials (now known as 'murderabilia') were regularly auctioned before substantial buying crowds oblivious to high Victorian morals and sensibilities.²¹ This profitable and extensive fascination with murder and murderers continued into the modern era and extended its reach and significance with the advent of mass media and new communication technologies.²²

Scholars of the obsession with the 'cult of crime' arguably underestimate the full extent of its power and hold over the populace during earlier periods. Moreover, their acknowledgement of the importance of the nineteenth century to 'the cult of the criminal' relates to male offenders alone and to serial killers (such as Jack the Ripper or H.H. Holmes) more specifically.²³ This ignores the significance of the Victorian moral panic over female killers and its impact upon the escalating obsession with fatal violence. The Victorian fascination with female killers is evident from comparing the media interest aroused by two micro-histories of homicide from 1879. The first, from March of that year, saw Thomas Perryman indicted at the Old Bailey for the murder of his mother Frances after an alcohol-fuelled skirmish in the family home in Kentish Town (London).²⁴ Thomas was accused of killing his mother by hanging her on an iron peg found on the back of a cupboard door in her bedroom before strangling her with a handkerchief, claiming that she had committed suicide.²⁵ Previous episodes of domestic abuse committed by Thomas against Frances incriminated him when the case came to court.²⁶ This, alongside his widely witnessed semi-permanent state of inebriation, the 'forensic' evidence presented in the case and the tragic suicide of his brother William, overcome with guilt at being unable to protect his beloved mother from the ravages of his violent elder brother,

resulted in Thomas Perryman being capitally convicted of matricide.²⁷ The sensational Perryman case generated ninety-two separate newspaper reports in both London and regional English newspapers. By comparison, however, the case-study which forms the focus for this chapter, the murder of Mrs Julia Martha Thomas by her servant Kate Webster (also in 1879), generated an astounding five hundred and ninety-seven separate newspaper articles. As we will see in Part IV below, interest in this particular murder micro-history was far more extensive and enduring than many other true-crime histories from either the Victorian era or beyond. Likewise, much of the fascination aroused by the Webster case related to the central protagonist being a violent female.

The murderess fascinated Victorian society because she encapsulated the antithesis of accepted gendered behaviour.²⁸ Just as their forbears, Victorian women were expected to be paragons of virtue, gentility and femininity and were encouraged to perform their role as moral guardians (within the domestic sphere) whilst displaying the innate maternal instincts and ethical principles to nurture future generations. Yet a spate of sensational poisoning trials during the nineteenth century exposed the potential for female deviousness of predominantly middle class women's performance of their domestic duties as they had poisoned their victims at home, during the course of food preparation. For Victorians then, female killers had not only committed a despicable offence, but had also stepped outside of the boundaries of 'expected' behaviour for their sex.²⁹ The dual threat that some women seemingly posed to Victorian society resulted in a pre-modern example of moral panic with social commentators crusading to reinstate traditional gender ideologies seemingly crucial for social stability. Concerns about female cunning became combined with

fears of female violence in attempts to reinforce the ideological orthodoxy. During the second half of the nineteenth the prevailing moral panic, coupled with the relative *rarity* of female killers in reality, made episodes of fatal female violence unduly prominent.³⁰ Female killers particularly interested a society already obsessed with murder and the macabre.³¹ Moreover, just as our interest in ‘the cult of the criminal’ has intensified over time, our preoccupation with murderous women has arguably become more amplified too.³²

IV

The case brought against Kate Webster at the Old Bailey in 1879 undoubtedly exemplified the fascination for murderous women in the Victorian era. Rather than providing a simple micro-history, this section concentrates on the elements of the case which exemplifies the modern era’s ‘cult of the criminal’. A detailed analysis of court records and the case’s extensive newspaper coverage makes it possible to identify six factors arguably crucial to establishing the infamy of this true-crime history. These were: (1) Interesting Back-story; (2) Crime as Mystery; (3) Ultra-Violent Methodology; (4) Criminal Characteristics; (5) Compelling End-game; and, (6) Storyline Stamina. Part V of this chapter analyses these factors and compares them with the public interest triggers evident for crime stories in more modern periods. This underlines why British society has had such an enduring obsession with homicide and engages with reactions and attitudes to violent female criminality.

Interesting Back-story

If Kate Webster’s final testimony is to be believed, she had lived an interesting life even before she came to work in the London Borough of Richmond, the scene of her

infamous crime. She was an Irish Catholic, born in Killane, County Wexford in 1849. She had been married to a sea captain called John W. Webster whilst still a teenager, bearing him four children. Tragically, however, her husband and all four of their children perished in uncertain circumstances.³³ Widowed and destitute, Webster turned to theft but was soon convicted of larceny and sentenced to a short spell of imprisonment. These events occurred prior to her emigration to England and all transpired before she had reached twenty years of age.³⁴

On arrival in Liverpool, sometime in the early 1860s, Webster turned petty thief once more, but she was not evidently a skilled criminal as she was apprehended again in 1867 and sentenced to four years penal servitude. Granted a ticket-of-leave in the third year of this sentence, Webster moved to London, where she lodged with a man called Strong. They had a bastard child together but Strong abandoned her and his son soon after his birth in 1874. Impoverished, alone and with a young baby to care for, Webster was convicted of larceny for a third time in May 1875 at the Surrey sessions, despite her best efforts to be peripatetic and to hide her identity through the use of aliases (such as Webb, Shannon, Gibbs, Gibbons, Lawler and somewhat ironically, Lawless).³⁵ Webster was well known to the police, however, and there is evidence to suggest that they had her under surveillance, suspecting her involvement in criminal gangs engaged in long firm swindles. This time, her criminal ventures (numbering thirty-six separate offences) earned her an eighteen month prison sentence at Wandsworth Gaol. After her release, Webster was in trouble once again and in February 1877, she was indicted for a further felony and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment.³⁶

In January 1879, Webster became a domestic servant in the house of wealthy eccentric Mrs Julia Martha Thomas, who lived in the London Borough of Richmond. Even by this point in her micro-history, Kate Webster had developed something of a reputation for recidivism and bold (or desperate) criminality in the face of both police and judicial authorities, who scarcely doubted her character and potential to cause trouble. Indeed, she was variously described by them at this time as ‘...a thorough jail-bird’, ‘...an habitual rogue’ and possessing ‘...an automatic inclination towards evil.’³⁷ The back-story of Kate Webster made for compelling reading amongst the Victorian public as her behaviour undermined her capacity for personal morality at a time when threatening female deviancy was firmly in the spotlight. Even before the fatal events of spring 1879 then, Kate Webster had already gained a degree of notoriety.

Crime as Mystery

Public fascination with the Kate Webster case became established not long after the murder of Mrs Thomas. This was because newspapers widely reported that on the 5th of March 1879 a box containing ‘...a mass of flesh’ and portions of a human body was found floating below Barnes Bridge in Richmond by local man Henry Wheatley.³⁸ At first the authorities dismissed the find as a vulgar prank carried out by university medical students.³⁹ But upon further detailed medical examination by the coroner Dr Thomas Bond, it became evident that dismemberment had not been discharged with anatomical skill and instead, that something more sinister had occurred, although the identity of the victim concerned remained unknown.⁴⁰ Contemporary newspapers thus dubbed the crime ‘The Barnes Mystery’ or ‘The Thames Mystery’ and speculation abounded over who was in the box and what had

happened to them.⁴¹ The find was of particular interest since it mirrored the mysterious discovery of body parts in a box under Waterloo Bridge in 1857. In this case the victim was never identified and the incident remained unexplained.⁴²

With the 1879 case, poisoning and later dismemberment were initially considered as methodologies, but were eventually ruled out by the coroner.⁴³ As we will see, a far more gruesome fate had befallen the inhabitant of the recovered box, much to the excitement of a Victorian public who poured over press reports of ghastly murders in ever increasing numbers. Moreover, the incomplete nature of the dismembered body (as parts of the lower torso, the feet, hands, arms and the head of the victim were missing⁴⁴), intensified interest in the case, encouraging some individuals to rummage through foul-smelling detritus in local refuse sites in search of the remaining anatomical evidence. However, aside from the victim's foot which was indeed discovered on a dung-heap as part of this macabre 'treasure-hunt', the unearthed material was dismissed by the authorities as either non-human or not linked to the case. Nevertheless, through incessantly reporting on all the clues and false leads stemming from public engagement in the case, as well theories developed from more formal police inquiries, the press had inflamed a great deal of interest in this apparent murder mystery, even in the initial phase of its discovery. Not long after the discovery of the infamous box was reported, a Mr Batterbee, who had become increasingly concerned for the welfare of his sister Mrs Julia Martha Thomas, visited the Richmond police and suggested that he entertained '...a moral certainty, but no legal proof' that the remains were that of his beloved sibling.⁴⁵ Mr Batterbee was right in his assertions, but vindication of his suspicions was a long time in coming as we will see.

Ultra-Violent Methodology

It was evident from witness testimony at the murder trial of Kate Webster initiated on the 30th of June 1879, that the relationship between Webster and her mistress was routinely ill-tempered.⁴⁶ Although initial newspaper reports portrayed Mrs Thomas as a 'pure' and innocent victim, trial testimony challenged this to portray Mrs Thomas as a difficult, confrontational woman.⁴⁷ Relations between the two women were clearly strained and indeed, Mrs Thomas had asked Webster to leave her duties just one week after her arrival, but Webster had managed to persuade her employer to relent.⁴⁸ Despite this reconciliation, subsequent heated arguments about the quality and timeliness of Webster's work were revealed in court.⁴⁹ The altercation that resulted in the death of Mrs Thomas was of particular interest to the courtroom as it indicated motive and the question of premeditation. Yet it was the methodology used to commit the murder that piqued Victorian curiosity and established an enduring fascination for this case. Webster had employed such savage violence and brutality in killing her victim that her actions genuinely shocked a public already immersed in details of cruelty, gore and death to such an extent that could presumed them to have been desensitised to accounts of murderous deeds.

After throwing Mrs Thomas down a flight of stairs, an intoxicated Webster then used rope to strangle her. On seeing her victim dead, Webster then tried to cover up her crime. She dismembered Mrs Thomas on the kitchen table using a razor, a meat saw and a carving-knife and then proceeded to use a water-filled copper to boil her remains in the hope that they would disintegrate leaving no trace. This process was time-consuming however and also resulted in a foul smell potentially noticeable to

neighbours, so Webster adopted an alternative strategy. She package up the body parts of her victim in various crates, boxes and bags and enlisted the help of Henry Porter and his son Robert (long-standing friends of Webster but oblivious that by aiding her they had become complicit in a homicide) to carry the packages to various locations where Webster surreptitiously disposed of them.⁵⁰

The ferocious but cunning manner by which Kate Webster murdered and disposed Mrs Thomas stunned Victorians and press reports of the court proceedings reflected the atrocity describing Webster as ‘...an awful butcher’, ‘...singularly fiendish’, ‘...primarily a savage’ and ‘...a perfect virago and tyrant.’⁵¹ It was not just the barbarous methodology deployed that captivated the nineteenth century populace, but also the fact that Webster was a woman who had seemingly committed the crime by herself for her own reasons. During a period noted for moral panics about female killers, Webster’s murderous actions represented brazen brutality which was difficult to rationalise, understand or ultimately excuse. Indeed, many contemporary commentators both in and out of the courtroom suggested, albeit erroneously, that Webster obviously had an accomplice and could not possibly have committed this crime alone.⁵²

Criminal Characteristics

By the time of Kate Webster’s trial, British society had begun to try to better understand female killers by regularly linking their exploits to episodic mental instability, caused by their distinctive biological and emotional composition. This medico-legal defence strategy enabled the actions of autonomous criminal women to be separated out from mainstream behaviours and to be considered as exceptional

and anomalous. Such explanations invited traditional gendered stereotypes of female behaviour to remain unspoilt. Yet a defence of temporary mental incapacity was not attempted in the Webster case, probably because of her proven and extensive criminal past. Instead, disaffiliating her from other women occurred through her portrayal in the Victorian press. For instance, her physical appearance was deemed somewhat unattractive: ‘...aged about thirty-two; five feet five or six inches high; complexion sallow; slightly freckled; teeth rather good but prominent; stout, strongly-made and usually clothed in dark dress.’⁵³ She was said to be ‘...exceedingly firm in her demeanour’, typically ‘...presenting an unmoved and self-possessed appearance’ and ‘...a sharp, fixed gaze’ as is partly evident from the image in Figure 1 below.⁵⁴ As we can see from this, Webster’s features were coarsened or ‘masculinised’ and elsewhere she is variously described as ‘...an individual with very low and very brutal instincts’ with ‘...a physique and demeanour which indicated much muscular power.’⁵⁵



Figure 1 – The Prisoner Kate Webster.⁵⁶

Aside from offering deconstructed versions of Webster's femininity, press portrayals focussed on her embodiment of particular characteristics seen to be typical amongst the Victorian criminal fraternity. These traits were, of course, wholly distinct from the attributes and virtues more commonly associated with the 'fairer sex'. Likewise, Webster's distinctive ethnicity counted against her during a period when anti-Irish sentiment remained a blatant feature of nineteenth century society.⁵⁷ Her native origins were said to largely explain her unvarying duplicity and her predilection for alcohol.⁵⁸ In addition, press reports emphasised the aggressive nature of Webster's character (as evident from the images at Figures 2 and 3 below) describing her as 'atrocious and cold-blooded', 'bold', 'defiant' and someone who would '...not brook opposition being offered to her.'⁵⁹

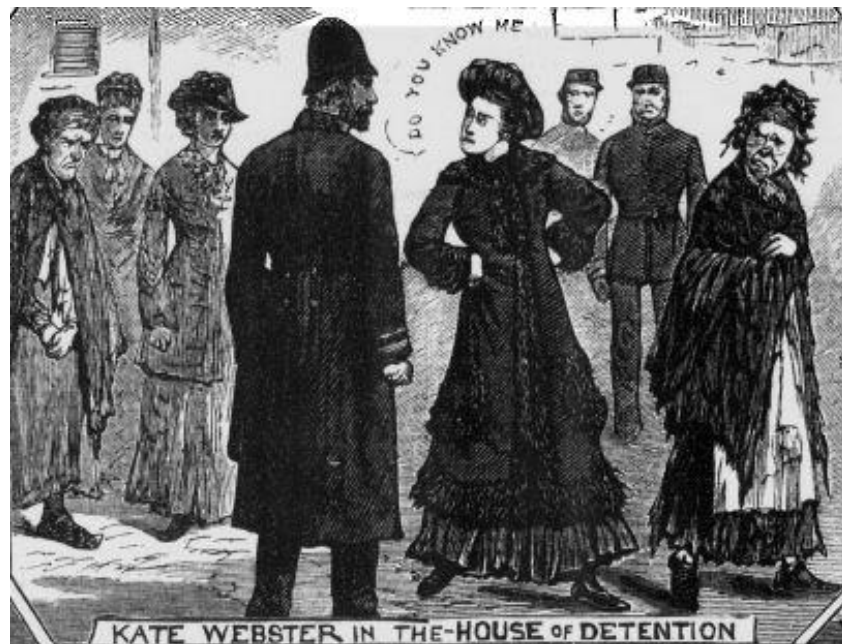


Figure 2 – Kate Webster in the House of Detention.⁶⁰



Figure 3 - Kate Webster Denouncing Church.⁶¹

The press also fixated on the numerous lies that Kate Webster told in court. Initially, Webster claimed that a man called John Church was in fact the cold-hearted killer in this case. Webster argued that Church had murdered Mrs Thomas, to rob the victim of her possessions and generate enough money from their re-sale to leave his wife and elope with Webster.⁶² When this suggestion was thoroughly discounted by Church's cast-iron alibi for the night of the murder, she then tried to implicate her friend Henry Porter in the killing. This accusation was also disproved. Although both Church and Porter had been involved in the purchase of Mrs Thomas' stolen goods, they had done so in good faith, misled by Webster.⁶³ Next, Webster suggested that the father of her illegitimate son, John Strong had been complicit and active in the murder of Mrs Thomas. However, there was no evidence to support this contention either.⁶⁴ Clearly, Webster was harnessing the contemporary belief discussed above that women were not autonomous actors in violent criminality. Indeed, the cornerstone of her defence was to persuade the court that at the behest of male

protagonists as befitted contemporary gender stereotypes and she suggested that her role in the 'Richmond Murder' had been relatively minor.⁶⁵

Webster's shifting testimony resulted in her being described as '...an inveterate liar.'⁶⁶ Her innate capacity for mendaciousness appeared blatant and deliberate to onlookers, as if Webster actively revelled in the public attention brought by her flagrant dishonesty.⁶⁷ Moreover, as the defendant's character was so key to Victorian criminal trials (and those brought against women in particular); Webster's deceitfulness was inherently problematic and self-destructive. Her lies destroyed her reputation and rendered it almost impossible for her to avoid the hangman's noose. Such views were reinforced by accounts which detailed Webster's assumption of the identity of her victim (wearing the dead woman's clothes and jewellery) to fake ownership of her erstwhile mistress' possessions and 'credibly' sell them off to unsuspecting vendors at substantial profits.⁶⁸ On the eve of her execution, when Webster did in fact tell an arguably closer version of the truth, implicating herself alone in the murder, no-one knew whether to believe this particular version of events or not, ensuring that certain elements of the case remained mysterious.⁶⁹

Alongside this catalogue of duplicity, Kate Webster was also portrayed as a woman with highly suspect 'personal' morals. Beyond being a drunkard, various contemporary newspaper articles suggested that Webster was 'wanton' or highly promiscuous and 'familiar' with a range of male associates.⁷⁰ Although Webster tried to manipulate this image to re-establish her femininity and portray herself as a victim of male exploitation (just as Emilie Foucault did in the previous chapter), this floundered due to her countless lies and her proven deceit.⁷¹ Clearly Victorian press

depictions of Kate Webster served to set her apart from the rest of her sex. Her 'masculinised' appearance, her 'Irish' ethnicity, her capacity for deception and her alleged immorality all distinguished Kate Webster from 'normal' Victorian women. But such portrayals also made her an intriguing criminal specimen for a Victorian public fascinated with the unfamiliar and the maleficent.

Compelling End-game

Press depictions of Kate Webster's criminal characteristics certainly contributed to the notoriety of her case, but elements of her arrest, her subsequent trial and its eventual outcome also made this true crime history a cause célèbre in late Victorian England. For instance, press attention regarding Kate Webster was stimulated when in March of 1879, the police formally named her as a suspect in the Richmond Murder but explaining she had evaded capture and was tantalising still at large. Reports pounced on this detail describing Webster as a 'wanted criminal'; a 'dangerous woman on the run'.⁷² Webster had fled back to Ireland when she realised her impersonations had been discovered. These exploits enthralled the Victorian populace and, although she was soon arrested and brought back to London to stand trial, an entire nation was now fixated on the accusations against her.

The details of Webster's crime did indeed fascinate Victorian society, especially when she was indisputably revealed to be a bare-faced liar who '...ceased to be worthy of belief' and who enjoyed being the centre of attention.⁷³ Webster's attempts to implicate others in what transpired were ultimately in vain however, as were the attempts of her defence counsel to portray her as a misunderstood and victimised loving mother incapable of murder. The defence also claimed that the remains found

were not that of Mrs Thomas and argued that even if they were that the victim might have died through natural causes.⁷⁴ This futile defence was inherently flawed and evidentially weak. It flew in the face of detailed and incontrovertible medical testimony, but it also contradicted evidence from Webster herself since she had attested on oath that Mrs Thomas had indeed been murdered, but by someone other than her.

Another piece of evidence given in court effectively sealed Webster's fate and gave Victorians more reasons to be fascinated by this case's central protagonist. Mary Durden testified that on the 25th of February 1879, (five days before the Richmond Murder) Webster boasted of her intention to sell various goods that had come into her possession as a result of an inheritance.⁷⁵ The merchandise described unequivocally matched that sold by Webster in the aftermath of Mrs Thomas's murder. Sensationally therefore, the testimony of Mary Durden described premeditation in this case. These were not the actions of a misunderstood miscreant acting rashly in hot-blood and out of desperation. Instead, Victorian London had a cold-blooded killer in its midst, and a woman at that. Reports of these details produced shock and awe in equal measure.⁷⁶

With the evidence now stacked against her, the outcome of Kate Webster's trial was almost inevitable. After a quick deliberation, the jury found her guilty and the judge sentenced her to death by hanging.⁷⁷ However, even this outcome did not diminish Webster's audacity. To the court's amazement, Webster 'pled the belly', claiming to be pregnant in order to exact a stay on her execution; a highly unusual ploy by the

middle of the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ After examination however, Webster's claim was proven to be a further ruse and she was taken away, a condemned woman.⁷⁹

Webster still courted press attention whilst awaiting her death sentence for, as we have seen, she submitted further 'confessions' and pleas for clemency in attempts to acquire a pardon. But her prolonged and repeated mendacities eventually caught up with her. Somewhat unusually for a female felon in the Victorian era, no application for remission was ever made on her behalf and no family or friends visited her whilst incarcerated much to her disappointment and consternation.⁸⁰ Kate Webster was executed in private at Wandsworth Gaol on the 29th of July 1879 by the hangman William Marwood as depicted in the image below.⁸¹

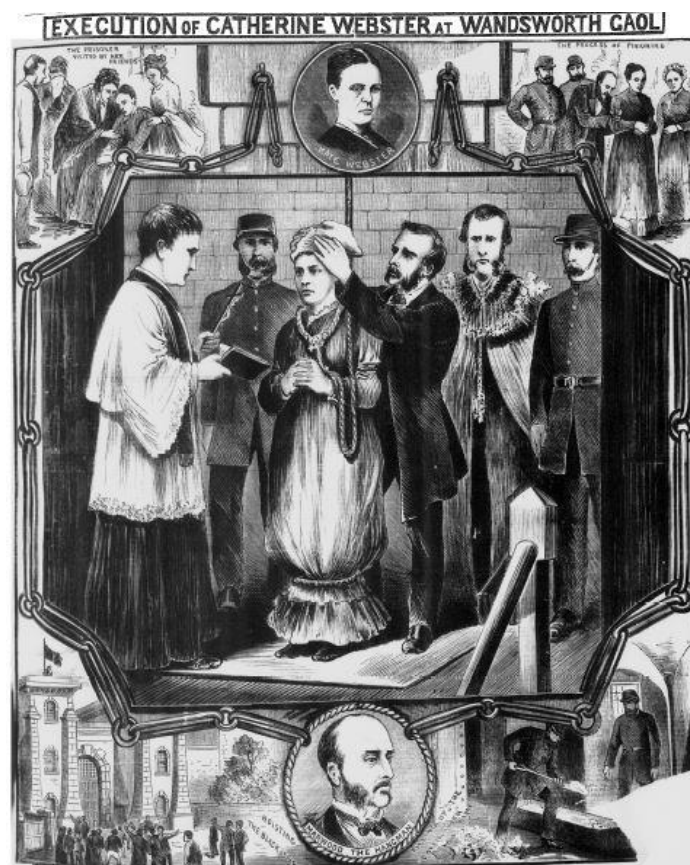


Figure 4 – The Execution of Kate Webster.⁸²

According to one newspaper report of her execution:

'The public must feel greatly relieved at the world being rid of so atrocious a criminal - a criminal who scrupled not to endeavour to incriminate innocent men to shield herself from the consequences of a monstrous crime.'⁸³

Unlike the vast audiences packing the courtroom to hear the details of her trial, only a handful of spectators waited outside the gaol to hear of her demise.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, somewhat shockingly, it was reported in a couple of accounts that her hanging had been botched and that she had to be hung twice.⁸⁵ This contention is dubious since William Marwood, the executioner, made no mention of any problems when referring to the case in his memoirs.⁸⁶ The suggestion of a botched execution may have been promulgated by contemporary campaigners against capital punishment or by media men intent on milking every last drop of sensationalism from this gripping Victorian murder story.

Storyline Stamina

As we have seen, the Webster case contained a myriad of elements which aroused public curiosity rendering it an early example of the 'cult of the criminal' normally associated with more modern periods.⁸⁷ The Webster case was infamous in 1879 where crowds of people thronged to the Old Bailey to catch a glimpse of the defendant and, as we have already seen, the press coverage of the case was vast and extensive.⁸⁸ The story achieved further longevity through the widespread publication of a souvenir special issue of the *Illustrated Police News* containing images generated from the court proceedings.⁸⁹ This gripped Victorian readers keen

on graphic and ghoulish pictorial keepsakes. In the aftermath of Webster's trial several newspapers reported that juvenile witnesses had (after Webster's execution) detailed how she had sold them quantities of 'beef' dripping in the Spring of 1879 and they now feared, in the wake of evidence presented at the trial, that the gloopy substance purchased had been rendered from the boiled cadaver of Mrs Thomas, rather than a butchered animal.⁹⁰ As one later commentator pointed out however:

'...there is no acceptable evidence that such a repulsive sale was ever made, and it is more than possible that the episode belongs rightfully with the rest of the vast collection of apocryphal stories that has accumulated, not unnaturally, about the persons and deeds of famous criminals.'⁹¹

In addition to tales of purported involuntary cannibalism, the case survived in the Victorian consciousness through various public auctions of paraphernalia from the case⁹² and through various waxwork exhibits of Kate Webster, including one shown at Madame Tussaud's from July 1879 until the middle of the next century.⁹³ According to Judith Knelman, the length of a criminal's 'stay' in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's is an indication of his or her prominence in the public mind, and Kate Webster's exhibit of more than six decades, is further testimony to her undoubted notoriety.⁹⁴ The opinions of commentators and historians on the case since the last decades of the nineteenth century have also kept the case in the minds of many. Modern crime aficionados became all too aware of the Webster case in October 2010 when a skull was discovered during excavations in the Richmond garden of the renowned naturalist Sir David Attenborough. After forensic examination and archival 'cold case' police research, the coroner Alison Thompson concluded in July 2011, that the remains found were those of Mrs Julia Martha Thomas. The

hearing concluded that Mrs Thomas had been unlawfully killed via ‘asphyxia by strangulation and a head injury.’⁹⁵ Some one hundred and thirty-three years after her initial notoriety, Kate Webster once again made headline news as a cold-blooded killer. Her criminal history, retold to new generations was as shocking and enthralling to modern audiences as it had been to Victorians. Thus Kate Webster’s infamy outlived and surpassed that of many other criminal men and women from British history and her notoriety remained unbowed despite the passage of time.

V

It is clear from Kate Webster’s micro-history that she became infamous as a result of her criminal misdeeds, but to what extent did the reasons for her notoriety coincide with the more modern ones outlined in Part II of this chapter? Criminologists Yvonne Jewkes and David Wilson argue that criminal histories become either famous or forgettable in the twentieth century context on the basis of certain criteria⁹⁶, but can these factors be applied to the Webster case from the Victorian era? The case certainly had what Jewkes refers to as ‘threshold’ due to the rarity of Victorian homicides and the concerns aroused by episodes of fatal violence.⁹⁷ The Richmond Murder also defied ‘predictability’ and ‘challenged conservatism’ because of the violent methodology used and the fact that the protagonist was a woman.⁹⁸ The case centred upon an ‘individual’ giving a human interest angle to the story, around both Kate Webster, and to a lesser extent her victim, Mrs Thomas. There was also an ‘evident motive’, whilst the story contained both ‘risk’ and a crescendo of ‘press interest’ approaching the trial due to the initial mystery surrounding the dismembered remains found, the chief suspect being at large, and the on-going uncertainty of whether Kate Webster had acted alone or with an accomplice. The ‘violence’ in the

case was certainly graphic and offered an imagined 'visual spectacle' to the Victorian populace at a time when journalists maximised sensationalist news stories. The 'proximity' of the murder to the 'sanctuary' of the domestic sphere in a fairly respectable environ of the nation's capital was also crucial in capturing press attention.⁹⁹ Finally, a 'substantial volume of testimony and evidence' facilitated the wide circulation of case's details ensuring that this particular true crime history endured in the minds of the public.

However, some aspects of the case evade the criteria for 'dark immortality' established between Jewkes and Wilson. For instance, the micro-history was complex rather than 'simple' and Victorians seemed enthralled by it regardless. There was no sex involved. No celebrities or children were directly concerned in the murder and the offender had no 'nickname' or moniker. Instead, there were other additional factors – essentially unique to this particular case – which gave it such prominence in the annals of crime history. The continual lies that Kate Webster told, alongside the bravado of her bare-faced deception in assuming her victim's identity, propagated fascination with this case throughout the relevant judicial procedures and beyond. The fact that Webster had acted autonomously and with excessive violence in this crime warranted explanation by the media, contemporary commentators and latterly by scholars as her actions so obviously transgressed norms of feminine behaviour.¹⁰⁰ Kate Webster's crime exemplified the dangers associated with the 'unwoman'; of what could happen if society ignored patriarchal conventions.¹⁰¹ Indeed, it was arguably Webster' status as a social outsider that made the most significant contribution to her enduring notoriety.

Kate Webster was not simply a gendered outsider. Her ethnicity invoked the prevailing Victorian anti-Irish sentiment to suggest that Webster's criminality was almost inevitable due to her 'base' heritage and ancestry.¹⁰² Furthermore, Webster's status as a domestic servant further contributed to notions of her social exclusion. By killing her employer and better, Kate Webster had both transgressed accepted gender boundaries and violated accepted social hierarchies.¹⁰³ Thus, Webster (and the type of 'unwoman' she represented) could be dangerous to society on many levels and in many different ways. Her infamy might have been complex, but it was assured, as the social relevance and appeal of this micro-history was extensive and multifarious.

VI

The case of Kate Webster clearly demonstrates that the 'cult of the criminal' and our fascination with individuals who kill are historic phenomenon and not simply constructs of the modern era. The case also shows that our obsession with fatal criminal violence was not solely restricted to the actions of male offenders as many modern scholars have suggested. Yet, as we have seen, our preoccupation with murder has been neither uniform nor homogenous. Not all crimes hit the headlines and not all criminals attain notoriety. Although some factors appear to be more important than others in determining whether or not a crime becomes infamous it is fair to say nonetheless, that in large part, infamy is subjective and case specific.¹⁰⁴ In the same way that the reasons for criminality are individualistic and based on specific circumstances, so the reasons for interest in particular criminal micro-histories are idiosyncratic and related to the context in which they occur, reoccur or are retold to new audiences.

Yet, we should not think of Kate Webster as a mysterious ‘other’ woman for too long. Certainly, as a proven autonomous actor in a homicide, her character and her actions could not be conveniently or easily explained away by Victorian society (unlike the Foucault case in the previous chapter) and this undoubtedly further cemented her infamy in the minds of contemporary society. However, her on-going notoriety should not be used to segregate her out as some sort of leviathan in the annals of criminal history. Our preoccupation with women’s perpetration of fatal violence then and now has undoubtedly sustained the notion that female killers should be considered aberrant in comparison with their male counterparts. Yet, as this micro-history has detailed, Kate Webster was, at root, a violent murderess. Such micro-histories show that women’s violence needs to be normalised, rather than sensationalised: she committed a crime autonomously using the violence men used and she did so for the same reasons. Kate Webster was different from other *women* in the Victorian era, but was she necessarily different from other *criminals*? As well as helping us to better understand criminals and their activities, public reactions to criminal episodes their fame or infamy, micro-histories can also help us to put crime in perspective. By analysing a crime in its context, micro-histories help us to better understand offending and offenders in the past as well as the present, and can suggest new interpretative avenues for the analysis of future criminal behaviour.

¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 28th of September 1871, Issue 2067.

² See J. Flanders (2011) *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* (London: Harper Press), R. Crone (2012) *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth Century London*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press) and L. Worsley (2013) *A Very British Murder: The Story of a National Obsession* (London: BBC Books).

³ L. Gribble (1957) *Famous Judges and Their Trials: A Century of Justice* (London: John Long), p. 65.

⁴ For further discussion of this cultural phenomenon in the United States see *ibid*, pp. 13-16, pp. 24-8 and pp. 84-6 as well as D. Schmid (2005) *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). For further discussion of the British experience of this see S. D'Cruze, S. Walklate and S. Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder* (Abingdon: Routledge), Chapter Two and B. Morrissey (2003) *When Women Kill: Question of Agency and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge), Chapter One.

⁵ M. Seltzer (1998) *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge), p. 2. See also M. Seltzer (1997) 'Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere', *October*, Vol. 80, pp. 3-26.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁷ For further discussion see Kass-Gergi (2012) 'Killer Personalities', pp. 8-9, pp. 13-16 and pp. 24-8; J.A. Fox and J. Levin (2005) *Extreme Killing: Understand Serial and Mass Murder* (Thousand Okas, CA: Sage Publications), Chapters One and Three; Schmid (2005) *Natural Born Celebrities*, Part Two and E. Leyton (1986 edition) *Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer* (Ontario: McClelland and Stewart), Chapter One.

⁸ B. King (1997) *Lustmord: The Writings and Artefacts of Murderers* (Burbank, CA: Bloat Books).

⁹ See T. Amirtha (2015) 'Why Dark Tourism is Thriving', *Motherboard*, 29th October 2015 found at http://motherboard.vice.com/en_uk/read/sightseeing-in-hell [accessed

01/11/2015]. The phenomenon of ‘Dark tourism’ has only recently received academic attention, although the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) has an established Institute for Dark Tourism Research – see http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/explore/groups/institute_for_dark_tourism_research.php. For more on this topic see the publications listed at the UCLAN website above as well as J.J. Lennon and M. Foley (2010) *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Andover: Cengage Publishing); M.S. Bowman and P.C. Pezzullo (2009) ‘What’s So “Dark” About “Dark Tourism”? Death, Tours and Performance’, *Tourism Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 187-202; but especially R. Sharpley and P. Stone (2009) (eds) *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Bristol: Channel View Publications).

¹⁰ For further discussion see Y. Jewkes (2011 edition) *Media and Crime* (Los Angeles and London: Sage), pp. 45-64.

¹¹ For further discussion see D. Wilson (2011) *Looking for Laura: Public Criminology and Hot News* (Sherfield-on-Loddon (Hampshire): Waterside Press), Chapter Five.

¹² For further discussion see V.A.C. Gatrell (1994) *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹³ R.D. Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murders and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co.), p. 9 and p. 302.

¹⁴ See *ibid*, p. 10 as well as Crone (2012) *Violent Victorians*, p. 80 and B. Walsh (2014) *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, p. 17.

¹⁶ For further discussion see M. Foucault (1978) ‘About the Concept of the “Dangerous Individual” in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry’, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

¹⁷ For further discussion see L. Perry Curtis (2001) *Jack the Ripper and the London Press* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), Chapters Three, Four and Five.

¹⁸ See V.A.C. Gatrell (1980) 'The Decline of Theft and Violence in Victorian and Edwardian England,' in V.A.C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker (eds), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500* (London: Europa Publications), pp. 238-370 and Worsley (2013) *A Very British Murder*, pp. 127-8.

¹⁹ Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, pp. 46-7. See also Perry Curtis (2001) *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, Chapter Three.

²⁰ See for instance Worsley (2013) *A Very British Murder*, pp. 53-77 and pp. 79-106; Crone (2012) *Violent Victorians*, pp. 80-116; Flanders (2011) *The Invention of Murder*, pp. 4-68 and pp. 172-3 and J. Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press), Chapter Two.

²¹ See for instance Crone (2012) *Violent Victorians*, p. 91 and Flanders (2011) *The Invention of Murder*, pp. 3-4 and p. 35.

²² See Worsley (2013) *A Very British Murder*, p. 294.

²³ See Kass-Gergi (2012) 'Killer Personalities', pp. 22-7 and Schmid (2005) *Natural Born Celebrities*, Chapter One. Both of these works focus entirely on the crimes of Jack the Ripper (unknown assailant who killed at least five prostitutes in Whitechapel, London in 1888) and H.H. Holmes (murderer, bigamist and con artist who confessed to killing twenty-seven young women at his hotel in Chicago, Illinois, and at other locations in North America, during the 1890s) in relation to the nineteenth century's contribution to our fascination with fatal violence.

²⁴ The Proceedings of the Old Bailey Online, The Trial of Thomas Perryman (1879), Ref. t18790331-395.

²⁵ See *ibid* as well as *Daily News*, 13th February 1879, Issue 10240 and *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 6th April 1879, Issue 1495;

²⁶ See *Daily News*, 13th February 1879, Issue 10240 and *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 6th April 1879, Issue 1495.

²⁷ See *Illustrated Police News*, 1st March 1879, Issue 785 and *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, 8th April 1879, Issue 5050.

²⁸ See for instance Worsley (2013) *A Very British Murder*, p. 139.

²⁹ See A. Lloyd (1995) *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned: Society's Treatment of Violent Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin); Walsh (2014) *Domestic Murder*, pp. 13-14 and Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 230. For further discussion of these cases and their prevailing impact on Victorian notions of female criminality see M.S. Hartman (1977) *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (London: Robson Books); P. Wilson (1971) *Murderess: A Study of Women Executed in Britain Since 1843* (London: Michael Joseph) and Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, Part Two.

³⁰ For more on the rarity of female homicide see M.B.W. Emmerichs (1993) 'Trials of Women for Homicide in Nineteenth-Century England', *Women and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 99-109 and M.M. Feeley and D.L. Little (1991) 'The Vanishing Female: The Decline of Women in the Criminal Process, 1687-1912', *Law and Society Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 719-57.

³¹ See Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 4 and Jewkes (2011 edition) *Media and Crime*, pp. 148-9.

³² For further discussion of more modern interest in female killers see D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, Chapter Three; Wilson (2011) *Looking for Laura*, pp. 109-10 and Jewkes (2011 edition) *Media and Crime*, pp. 122-3.

³³ *The Times*, 2nd April 1879, Issue 29531.

³⁴ E. O’Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster in the Central Criminal Court, London, July, 1879, for the Murder of Mrs. Julia Martha Thomas* (Edinburgh: W. Hodge), p. 5.
[Yale Law School Library, Ref. ID CTRG98-B3022]

³⁵ For evidence of Webster’s use of aliases see *The Times*, 28th and 29th of March 1879, Issues 29527 and 29528 respectively; *Reynolds’ Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1494 and *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 31st March 1879 and 1st of April 1879, Issues 9632 and 9633 respectively. See also K. Clarke (2013) *Bad Companions: Six London Murderesses Who Shocked the World* (Stroud: The History Press), p. 187.

³⁶ O’Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, pp. 6-9. For Webster’s offences prior to 1879 see newspaper reports in the *Liverpool Mercury*, 25th May 1866, Issue 5716; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 29th March 1879, Issue 6466; *The Times*, 29th March 1879, Issue 29528 and *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1st April 1879, Issue 9633. See also N. Morland (1955) *Background to Murder* (London: Werner Laurie), pp. 171-4 and Clarke (2013) *Bad Companions*, p. 187.

³⁷ O’Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, p. 15 and Morland (1955) *Background to Murder*, p. 171.

³⁸ O’Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ *Reynolds’ Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1494.

⁴⁰ See *The Morning Post*, 19th March 1879, Issue 33299.

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- ⁴¹ See for instance *Belfast News-Letter* and *Daily News*, 29th March 1879, Issue 19832 and 10278 respectively.
- ⁴² See O'Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, p. 3 and Clarke (2013) *Bad Companions*, p. 192.
- ⁴³ See *Birmingham Daily Post*, 29th March 1879, Issue 6466.
- ⁴⁴ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1494.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.* See also *Leeds Mercury*, 29th March 1879, Issue 12782.
- ⁴⁶ See The Proceedings of the Old Bailey Online, The Trial of Catherine Webster (1879), Ref. t18790630-653.
- ⁴⁷ For varying descriptions of Mrs Thomas see *Daily Gazette*, 29th March 1879, Issue 3675; *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 30th March 1879 and *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1st April 1879, Issue 9633.
- ⁴⁸ See *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1st April 1879, Issue 9633.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also *The York Herald* and the *Dundee Courier and Argus*, 1st August 1879, Issues 7009 and 8122 respectively and *The Sheffield and Rotherham and Independent*, 2nd August 1879, Issue 7760.
- ⁵¹ See Gribble (1957) *Famous Judges and Their Trials*, p. 68 and O'Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, p. vii, p. 27 and p. 42.
- ⁵² See for instance *Daily Gazette*, 29th March 1879 and 8th July 1879, Issues 3675 and 3760 respectively and *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 13th July 1879, Issue 1509.
- ⁵³ *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1494.
- ⁵⁴ See *The Times*, 3rd April 1879, Issue 29532 and *The Daily News*, 10th April 1879, Issue 10288.

⁵⁵ See respectively *Illustrated Police News*, 9th August 1879, Issue 808 and *The Lancaster Gazette*, 16th July 1879, Issue 4946. For further discussion of the masculinised nature of press depictions of Victorian female killers in the press see K.A. Tucker (2013) “Abominations of the Female Sex”: Five Case Studies of Late Nineteenth Century Criminal Women’, Unpublished MA (By Research) Dissertation, University of Central Lancashire, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁶ *Illustrated Police News*, 3rd May 1879, Issue 794.

⁵⁷ See for instance D.M. MacRaild (2010 edition) *The Irish Diaspora in Britain, 1750-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan), Chapter Seven.

⁵⁸ See for instance Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 197; Morland (1955) *Background to Murder*, p. 171 and p. 173 and Tucker (2013) “Abominations of the Female Sex”, p. 81.

⁵⁹ See respectively *Illustrated Police News*, 19th July 1879, Issue 805; *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1st April 1879, Issue 9633 and *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1897.

⁶⁰ *Illustrated Police News*, 26th April 1879, Issue 793.

⁶¹ *Illustrated Police News*, 10th May 1879, Issue 795.

⁶² See *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1st April 1879, Issue 9633 and *John Bull*, 5th April 1879, Issue 3043.

⁶³ See *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 15th April 1879, Issue 7668 and *John Bull*, 19th April 1879, Issue 3045 as well as the trial testimony referenced in the works cited at notes 40 and 52 above. It has been estimated that Webster would have made a profit of approximately two or three years’ salary from the sale of her victim’s possessions - see D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ See *Daily Gazette*, 10th July 1879, Issue 3762; *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 19th July 1879, Issue 938 and *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 23rd July 1879, Issue 7751.

⁶⁵ For reports of Kate Webster's defence see *Daily News*, 4th July 1879, Issue 10361; *The Morning Post*, 8th July 1879, Issue 33394 and *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 13th July 1879, Issue 1912 as well as the trial testimony referenced at in the works cited in notes 40 and 52 above.

⁶⁶ Morland (1955) *Background to Murder*, p. 171.

⁶⁷ See for instance *The Times*, 3rd April 1879, Issue 29532; *The Graphic*, 19th July 1879, Issue 503 and *Illustrated Police News*, 9th August 1879, Issue 808 and accounts of Webster's dramatic but deceitful outburst in court reported in *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30th April 1879, Issue 6493

⁶⁸ See the trial testimony referenced at in the works cited in notes 40 and 52 above as well as Wilson (1971) *Murderess*, p. 195 and D'Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 55. It has been estimated that Kate Webster stood to make the equivalent of two or three years wages from the sale of Mrs Thomas's furniture alone: see D'Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 56.

⁶⁹ See for instance *The York Herald*, 1st August 1879, Issue 8122.

⁷⁰ See for instance *The Times*, 2nd April 1879, Issue 29531; *The Huddersfield Chronicle*, 4th April 1879, Issue 3639 and *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 10th April 1879, Issue 1899.

⁷¹ See for instance *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 10th July 1879, Issue 7740; *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 15th July 1879, Issue 7615 and *The Newcastle Courant*, 18th July 1879, Issue 10672 as well as the trial testimony referenced at in the works cited in notes 40 and 52 above. For further discussion of attempts to

assume the role of victim in this case see D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 53 and for similar attempts in other murder cases brought against women at this time see Hartman (1977) *Victorian Murderesses*, p. 261; A. Ballinger (2000) *Dead Women Walking: Executed Women in England and Wales 1900-1955* (Aldershot: Ashgate), p. 3 and pp. 135-6 and Morrissey (2003) *When Women Kill*, p. 17.

⁷² See for instance the report in *Reynolds’ Newspaper*, 30th March 1879, Issue 1494.

⁷³ *The York Herald*, 15th July 1879, Issue 6994. For additional accounts labelling Webster a liar see *The Times*, 3rd April 1879, Issue 29532; *Western Mail*, 4th April 1879, Issue 3091; *The Huddersfield Chronicle*, 5th April 1789, Issue 3640; *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 12th July 1879, Issue 937; *Y Genedl Gymreig (The Welsh Nation)*, 17th July 1879, Issue 128 [I am grateful to Mrs Rhian Perridge for providing a translation of this account] and *Illustrated Police News*, 9th August 1879, Issue 808.

⁷⁴ See the trial testimony referenced in the works cited at notes 40 and 52 above as well as *The Graphic*, 24th May 1879, Issue 495; *Daily Gazette*, 8th July 1879, Issues 3760 and *Reynolds’ Newspaper*, 13th July 1879, Issue 1509.

⁷⁵ See the trial testimony referenced in the works cited at notes 40 and 52 above as well as *Manchester Times*, 10th May 1879, Issue 1117 and *Leeds Mercury*, 8th July 1879, Issue 12868.

⁷⁶ For further discussion of the reaction to proven premeditation in murders committed by women see Ballinger (2000) *Dead Women Walking*, p. 129.

⁷⁷ See O’Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, pp. 211-13; *John Bull*, 12th July 1879, Issue 446 and *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 12th July 1879, Issue 937.

⁷⁸ For more on the historic use of this plea see J.C. Oldham (1985) 'On Pleading the Belly: A History of the Jury of Matrons', *Criminal Justice History*, Vol. 6, pp. 1-64.

⁷⁹ See O'Donnell (1925) *Trial of Kate Webster*, pp. 211-13; *The Cheshire Observer*, 12th July 1879, Issue 1405 and *The Blackburn Standard*, 12th July 1879, Issue 2282.

⁸⁰ See *The York Herald*, 15th July 1879, Issue 6994 and *The Times*, 29th July 1879, Issue 29632.

⁸¹ For detailed descriptions of her execution see (1879) *Trial, Sentence and Execution of Kate Webster for the Murder of Mrs Thomas at Richmond*, Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, Broadsides: Murder and Execution, 11 (18).

⁸² *Illustrated Police News*, 2nd of August 1879, Issue 807. It should be noted that the picture inaccurately depicts Webster being visited in prison by her friends.

⁸³ *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 2nd August 1879, Issue 940.

⁸⁴ See *The York Herald*, 30th July 1879, Issue 7007 and *The Times*, 30th July 1879, Issue 29633.

⁸⁵ See for instance *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 4th August 1879 and *The York Herald*, 28th August 1879, Issue 7032.

⁸⁶ See D. Matthews (2010) *William Marwood: The Gentleman Executioner* (Peterborough: Fastprint Publishing), pp. 152-63.

⁸⁷ For a corroborative opinion see Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, p. 225.

⁸⁸ For contemporary commentary on the widespread frenetic interest in the Webster case see *Y Genedl Gymreig (The Welsh Nation)*, 3rd April 1879, Issue 113; *The Huddersfield Chronicle*, 5th April 1879, Issue 3640; *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 9th April 1879, Issue 7531 which stated that the case was '...the most exciting of modern times'; *The Daily News*, 10th April 1879, Issue 10288 and *Baner ac Amserau Cymru (The Banner and Times of Wales)*, 16th July, Issue 1168 [I am grateful to Mrs

Rhian Perridge for providing a translation of the two Welsh accounts referenced at this note]. See also W. Wood (1916) (ed.) *Survivors' Tales of Famous Crimes* (London: Cassell and Company), p. 96.

⁸⁹ In addition to this special issue - 19th July 1879 Issue 805 - and the images already shown in this chapter, illustrations related to the Webster case can be seen in *Illustrated Police News*, 12th April 1879 Issue 791, 19th April 1879 Issue 792, 17th May 1879 Issue 796, 24th May 1879 Issue 797, 12th July 1879 Issue 804, 26th July 1879 Issue 806, 2nd August 1879 Issue 807, 9th August 1879 Issue 808 (represented on the front cover of this volume); *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 5th July 1879, Issue 936, 12th July 1879 Issue 937 and *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 4th May 1879 Issue 1902.

⁹⁰ See for instance Gribble (1957) *Famous Judges and Their Trials*, p. 69 and Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, p. 226.

⁹¹ Gribble (1957) *Famous Judges and Their Trials*, p. 69.

⁹² For reports of these auctions see *Dundee Courier and Argus*, 18th July 1879, Issue 8110 and *Belfast News-Letter*, 31st July 1879, Issue 20018. It is interesting to note that one of the suspected accomplices in the Richmond Murder, John Church, purchased several items of memorabilia related to the case including a carving knife suspected to be used in the dismemberment of the victim's corpse.

⁹³ For newspaper advertisements of these exhibits see *The Morning Post*, 31st July 1879, Issue 33414 and *Liverpool Mercury*, 1st August 1879, Issue 9844. For commentary which describes such events as 'horrible and nauseous' see *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 4th August 1879.

⁹⁴ According to Knelman, Webster's exhibit lasted until 1945 - see Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 23 and p. 198 and note 55 on that page.

⁹⁵ See *The Telegraph*, 5th July 2011; *Daily Mail*, 6th July 2011 and *Daily Express*, 9th July 2011.

⁹⁶ See the references at notes 13 and 14 above.

⁹⁷ See C. Emsley (2005 edition) *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* (Harlow: Longman), p. 41-2 and M.J. Wiener (2004) *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 13.

⁹⁸ For evidence of the notoriety of violence in this case, see *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 18th July 1879, Issue 4900 which reported that a female criminal was imprisoned for sharpening a knife in front of her husband and vowing that ‘...she would do to him as Kate Webster did to Mrs Thomas – cut his head off, and boil it in the wash-pot.’ For further discussion of the importance of gender in this case see D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 56; Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 15 and C.A. Conley (2007) *Certain Other Countries: Homicide, Gender, and National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press), p. 84.

⁹⁹ For further discussion of the importance of location in this case and others like it in the Victorian era see Walsh (2014) *Domestic Murder*, p. 3 and pp. 13-14 and Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁰ For further discussion of the importance of this factor see L. Zedner (1991) *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 28; Emsley (2005 edition) *Crime and Society*, p. 107; Ballinger (2000) *Dead Women Walking*, p. 130 and Tucker (2013) “Abominations of the Female Sex”, p. 30, p. 79 and p. 88.

¹⁰¹ For further discussion of the threat posed by unruly women in the Victorian era see Zedner (1991) *Women, Crime and Custody*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰² For further discussion of the association between the Irish and criminality during the Victorian era see Conley (2007) *Certain Other Countries*, pp. 3-4, pp. 41-3, pp. 51-2 and Emsley (2005 edition) *Crime and Society*, p. 99. For more on the importance of ethnicity in this particular case see Tucker (2013) “Abominations of the Female Sex”, p. 81 and p. 87 and D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, pp. 56-7.

¹⁰³ For further discussion of the notoriety brought about by the violence of domestic servants against their masters/mistresses in the Victorian era see Knelman (1998) *Twisting in the Wind*, Chapter Seven; Altick (1970) *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, Chapter Twelve; Flanders (2011) *The Invention of Murder*, p. 187; Emsley (2005 edition) *Crime and Society*, p. 99; D’Cruze, Walklate and Pegg (2011 edition) *Murder*, p. 53 and Morrissey (2003) *When Women Kill*, p. 18. In the wake of the Webster case, see the commentary on this issue provided in *Illustrated Police News*, 19th July 1879, Issue 805.

¹⁰⁴ For further discussion see Morrissey (2003) *When Women Kill*, p. 18.