The Poison Mania:

Why Mary Ann Cotton Scared Victorian Society

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November 28, 2017

Often being referred to as Britain’s first female serial killer, Mary Ann Cotton seemingly got away with murder for almost two decades before any suspicions aroused. Twice widowed and with over twenty loved ones dead, it was clear that death followed her closely. It was not until her seemingly well stepson died suddenly that Cotton’s misfortune was coming to be understood as her own doing. After a closer examination, it was clear that there was foal play involved in her stepson, Frederick Cotton’s untimely death. Arsenic was deemed to be the poison that killed the young boy, and Mary Ann Cotton was accused of murder. Poison was nothing new to the Victorian era; it was quite the opposite. Not only was poison present in any imaginable household item, but also the 19th century had seen a peak of poisoning cases that had sparked a moral panic in Victorian society. Cotton’s supposed list if victims was one of the largest to be known, yet her case was not as highly publicized in comparison to some more sensational poisoning cases with much fewer victims like with the case of Madeline Smith, a socialite and one time poisoner. Cotton’s case does however give insight to Victorian morals and fears, and also perceptions of class and gender. By examining the moral panic that came out of this “poison mania” of the 19th century, a clearer insight is gained of why Mary Ann Cotton’s case did and did not matter to the Victorian society. Cotton’s extensive list of victims only reaffirmed the underlying anxieties that Victorian society felt about societal change. The image of a poisoning murderess threatened the ideals that women were to follow, and with a spike in these female poison cases, these ideals were deteriorating. Cotton’s unpopularity in not only the media coverage but also in common opinion, will also be examined to prove that class was one of the most pivotal factors in determining one’s character, and consequentially their innocent or guilt.

Mary Ann Cotton grew up in a working class family with her father being a miner.[[1]](#footnote-1) She worked for three years as a nursemaid for her colliery manager, and then became a dressmaker. She met a labourer named William Mowbray, and married him in 1852. They had several children together, whom died at a young age leaving Cotton with one live child. Mowbray died in 1865, and Cotton received his life insurance payment of thirty pounds.[[2]](#footnote-2) The death of her mother soon followed. George Ward was Cotton’s next husband, who she met while she was nursing in the Sutherland Infirmary until his health improved and they married in 1865. The following year Ward fell ill and died, leaving Mary Ann widowed once again. The following year she remarried to a shipwright named James Robinson. His suspicions arose when he found out that Mary Ann was mismanaging his finances and thus he kicked her out. Other reports state that neighbours were getting suspicious of her past, and thus she disappeared with her daughter. By 1870, she married another miner named Frederick Cotton.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is important to note that she was still married to Robinson at this time, as this surely impacted public opinion of her character. Frederick Cotton died the following year. In the next two years, Mary Ann Cotton’s lodger, Joseph Nattras who has been rumoured to have been her lover, and two children died at the hands of what was deemed “gastric fever”. Cotton complained openly about her surviving step-son, Charles Edward Cotton, as financially hindering her. Witnesses quoted her saying, “he’ll go like the rest of the Cottons” a few days before his death, which sparked an inquest that led to the finding of arsenic in the boy’s body.[[4]](#footnote-4) Cotton was arrested, put on trial and hung in 1873 for the death of Charles Edward Cotton.

Although it was not proven, it is widely believed that Mary Ann Cotton was the cause of many of the deaths that she witnessed in her life. Specifically she was held responsible for the deaths of all of her husbands and lovers, her mother and if not all, than most of her children. Yet, this was only assumed in revelation of her last kill, in which she was convicted for. In hindsight, Victorians believed her victim count was anywhere from fourteen to twenty-one lives. However, at the time of the deaths nothing seemed too peculiar. Infant mortality rates were still quite high in the 19th century due to lack of advanced medicine, poor sanitation, and high levels of poverty.[[5]](#footnote-5) This would explain why maybe people were not questioning the deaths of Cotton’s youngest children. Furthermore, due to the poor systems of birth or death registration in the mid 19th century, it cannot be proven that Cotton ever had her first four children that she had claimed had died during her first marriage.[[6]](#footnote-6) This works also in her favour, as there was no evidence of the deaths of this children if she did not make it known to those we do not know her past. Since her husband and children were out of the picture, there would be nobody to alarm new people in her life of her past.

In the cases of Cotton’s family and loved ones, they were thought to have all died with symptoms of gastric fever. This was not an unusual diagnosis as Victorians were common with stomach ailments. This can be attributed to the lack of regulation of adulteration in foods, and the lack of understanding of how that adulteration would affect the human body.[[7]](#footnote-7) Symptoms of arsenic poisoning mimicked the symptoms of gastric poisoning very closely. Victims would show symptoms of stomachaches, fever, diarrhea, and vomiting all parallel to regular gastric fevers, and thus misdiagnoses were common. Not to mention that inquests cost money as do the coroners and physicians who need to be paid for providing their services, and since Mary Ann Cotton was part of the working class, there would be no interest in funding an inquest when deaths could simply be attributed to natural causes.[[8]](#footnote-8) This similar symptoms would also explain the draw to poison as a murder weapon.

Cotton was hung within the Durham prison walls with only a few spectators allowed to watch as public hangings were outlawed by 1868.[[9]](#footnote-9) There are reports of crowds waiting outside of the prison during her execution, waiting to hear that the execution has taken place.[[10]](#footnote-10) The interest in this working class case can be attributed to two things. One reason being the sole fact that after investigation, it was speculated that Cotton had caused many deaths through poisoning and thus Britain had a presumed serial killer at their hands. The other reason was the rising societal panic regarding poisoning. There was a media frenzy that claimed there was a poisoning epidemic that only symbolized the deterioration of society. The constant media coverage of poisoning trials only acted as a how to guide on poisoning and inadvertently how to avoid being caught. Explicit details of how the accused were killing their victims were highlighted in newspapers which included the amount of poison needed, the best methods to hide the bitter taste, and what detrimental mistake the accused made that led to their arrest.[[11]](#footnote-11) Ironically, the media feared of a secret ring of poisoners who were spreading their secrets and corrupting other women to lash out against their husbands, all while they insentiently helped spread this supposed secret poisoning cult.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Mary Ann Cotton symbolized what Whorton labels a “new race of poisoner”. She was first off a woman, and second she was also a working woman on the edge of poverty.[[13]](#footnote-13) The poor could now afford arsenic, as it was sold at a penny’s worth. Victorians could ask their local pharmacist for a “penn’orth of poison” which was the smallest amount of arsenic that would be sold, but would be more than enough to kill any infestation of rats that the buyer could be claiming to need the poison for.[[14]](#footnote-14) Arsenic was used as a cheaper substitute for other materials in order for the working class to be able to afford their products. One example is “composition candles” which were later nicknamed “corpse candles” due to the deaths that were at the hands white arsenic emitting from the wax as when the candle burned.[[15]](#footnote-15) The poor were also suspected to be using burial clubs, that were set up by the government to aid the poor in their loved one’s funeral, as motivation to commit murder.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This poison mania that the newspaper seemed to be implying existed, begun before Cotton’s arrest. The peak of poison related trials was in the 1840s, although poison was readily available before then. This could perhaps explain why her case was not front page worthy as well, as she was tried after the introduction of regulation of arsenic sales in 1851.[[17]](#footnote-17) This showed a decrease in the number of poison cases, and thus the panic perhaps was beginning to simmer down compared to when it was at its peak. In 1895, *The Illustrated London News* compared the poison trials to the Salem trials, displaying that there was some doubt to the poison mania at the end of the century, and it in fact was along the lines of a public hysteria.[[18]](#footnote-18) Either way, there was the thought that a moral epidemic was at foot in the mid 19th century, and the murdering women were central to it. Murdering wives represented to failure of marriage, and fears of the normalization of poisoning your husband in the face of marital problems was a constant fear. The notion of the vindictive poisoning wife was so wide-spread that it was represented in Victorian slang. Wives casually warning their husbands that they would “white-powder” them if they got out of line was a direct reference to the white powdered arsenic poisoners were using.[[19]](#footnote-19) This can be compared to the threat of physical assault a husband may give to their wife that would be accepted as not quite an empty threat, as domestic violence was prevalent.

Although more men were tried for poisoning their wives, women became the face of domestic poisoning. The notion that women were so desperate to exit their relationships that they would be willing to kill only symbolized the dark secrets of Victorian domestic life. Women who poisoned their husbands were usually not doing it for financial gain, as the loss of a husband’s income was detrimental for the family. Although with the expansion in numbers of insurance companies, the fear that poor women would take advantage of the promise of some extra cash, as this was the case with Mary Ann Cotton.[[20]](#footnote-20) Women who remarried after their husband’s passed were looked as suspiciously although most would have to move on for the assurance of another husband’s income.[[21]](#footnote-21) Poisoning symbolized the failure of marriage because it displayed women were lashing out against their husbands, and were no longer accepting their position as their subordinates thus threatening the patriarchal society.

A woman’s character was often used as circumstantial evidence in their poison trials. A negative picture was painted of a woman by outlining any sexual deviant behaviour, or any eyebrow raising behaviour that went outside the typical idea of a woman being the virtuous, caring mother and/or wife that she ought to be.[[22]](#footnote-22) Mary Ann Cotton’s bigamous marriage to Frederick Cotton would have only been used as damning evidence that she was capable of murder. Woman motherhood was also essentially put on trial, and if she was able to be presented as a fit mother based on how kind or caring she was, than her innocence was unquestionable even if other evidence, like found traces of arsenic in the deceased’s body, would say otherwise.[[23]](#footnote-23) If she could be presented as a negligent mother, or wife, than she was essentially evil and murderous. It almost seems as if there was no in between in Victorian society’s eyes. The increasing number of women who were found guilty of poisoning their families, painted a picture that the virtues of women were in a bleak state.

Further adding to the poison hysteria, was that poison was so readily available and in so many household items, that it made it hard to prove that it was not an accidental poisoning. If the accused was testified against to buying poison, it made it hard to prove that the accused had bought the poison in intention to murder which was a crucial part of the trial. Green dye was often cheaply made with arsenic, and there had been a spike in favour of all things green.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus you could find it in wallpaper, food wrappings, toys, fabrics, and any other household items. It was like Victorians were unaware of the arsenic in their household items, nor were they ignorant to the dangers of flaking green arsenical wallpaper but it was of the latest fashion and that was seemingly enough reason for the middle-class to take the risk, as it was not completely proven that these items like green wallpaper could contaminate the air. [[25]](#footnote-25) For the lower classes, it would probably be more attributed to the lower costs of adulterated items. In Mary Ann Cotton’s defense, they had tried to claim that the child had died from a poisoned soap she used on his sheets. *The Leeds Mercury* reported that she had told her step-father when he visited her in prison, that the grocer in Auckland must have given her arsenic, instead of the arrowroot she had intended to give to the sick boy. The paper claims she said she was confused, and so she did not speak up when she questioned if the powder that she was given by the grocer was truly arrowroot.[[26]](#footnote-26) In either case, the arsenic was not denied but blamed to either come from a human error or adulterated product.

By comparing common opinion of Cotton to the opinions of another murderess, Madeline Smith, it is clear that class is a dominant factor in judging one’s character. Mary Ann Cotton was of working class descent while Madeline Smith was of the upper class. Smith was put on trial for the murder of her ex-lover, Pierre L’Angelier and was found innocent due to the prosecution’s failure at proving the case against her. Unlike Cotton, who was constantly referred to as “wretched woman”[[27]](#footnote-27), Madeline had immense public sympathy even though during her trial her sexual deviance was exposed to the public, as it was a highly publicized trial.[[28]](#footnote-28) Newspapers’ accounts of the trial focus on Madeline’s looks, or confident presence that must have displayed her lack of guilt. In the Belfast News covering of her trial, they focus on her boldness and strong character in a positive light.[[29]](#footnote-29) Damning love letters were presented in the case as evidence that she was fearful these letters being publicized in order to prove murder was a possible solution for her. There was also proof that she had bought arsenic before L’Angelier’s death. After the trial, Madeline found great public support from most.

Although one main difference in Madeline Smith’s case and Mary Ann Cotton’s case is the number of victims, Cotton was on trial for only the death of Charles Edward Cotton. It was commonly speculated that she was the cause of many more deaths, but there was no evidence put forward for that. Traces of arsenic were found in both Joseph Nattras’ body and Frederick Cotton’s but again, this was not used against her in court. In both cases, a motif was clearly presented and yet in Madeline’s case it was believed that the case was not proven enough against her. Both women claimed innocence until the end, but only Madeline was spared her life. Furthermore, the courts had tried to paint a picture of a virtuous woman who was lead astray by a lower class man.[[30]](#footnote-30) This was the opposite of Cotton, where there seemed to be no pity for the woman, and no doubt that she had committed the murder. *The Illustrated London News* went as far as to claim that nobody believed she was innocent, and goes on to label her a “bad woman”.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is a reflection of how class can alter how character is perceived in Victorian society and how the media went on to demonize the working class while showing sympathy to those with higher social standing. Cotton was part of the working class and thus she was generally thought to be more capable of murder and for this, she was probably given less sympathy for the accusations against her.[[32]](#footnote-32) Cotton’s lower class is also a factor to why Cotton’s trial did not get as much publicity as Madeline’s. Even though the Victorians believed Cotton was a serial poisoner, Madeline’s high-class position in society was more sensational.

The so-called poison mania of the Victorian era arose because there was a great influx in poisoning cases in the 19th century. This can be attributed to the easy access to poison as it was readily available for a penny’s worth, and was found in almost anything in the Victorian home. Death by poison could be quick, and could go undetected if a inquest was not made, thus it made poison attractive to those who did want to find a way out of their unsatisfactory circumstances. This was the case for many poisoners, like Madeline Smith. These small number of cases were extremely well publicized and led to societal overreactions that made the issue at hand seem like a larger one. Constant press coverage only spread the idea of poisoning your spouse to exit your unhappy living situation, and created hysteria within society that a poisoning evil woman was around every corner. Mary Ann Cotton’s case was extraordinary, as she had seemingly got away with multiple murders, yet her case wasn’t a front-page story. The newspaper accounts were not positive, nor optimistic of her innocence, and they were generally short. This being due to her trial taking place closer to the end of the 19th century, after the height of the poison mania and because it was a working class case, that did not result in the same sensational story that an upper class murderess would yield. She did however still represent societal fears of a poison epidemic. The was a mother and wife who was betraying her gender norms and marriage vows while at the same time representing the wicked poor who could be lured into such horrible acts by the promise of financial gain. Cotton, along with all the other murdering women, were representations for the deteriorating state of Victorian society that was built on patriarchal rule.

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