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Sugar, Spice, and Everything…. Maybe not so Nice

In a society where the man is known to be the provider and protector, and the woman is the more gentle, moral, and sensitive of the two, what would happen if these gender norms were violated? Women who committed crime did exactly that: it broke the perception of what a woman was “supposed” to be. The Victorians were exceedingly intrigued with crime and scandals. When women committed murder, one of the most scandalous crimes there is, the general public was both disgusted and captivated as women were supposed to nurture life, not take it away. Among women, murder victims were most often a husband or lover, babies or children, or elderly parents, and of these three groups, 91% of the time it was a baby or child that was murdered.[[1]](#footnote-1) There were two different situations in which a child was murdered: one where the mother commits infanticide and one where someone else murders the child. It is the latter of the two that evoked public rage. Child murder was a much more forgivable offence and often times hardly seen as a crime at all. Baby farming on the other hand was seen as one of the most horrid offences a woman could commit in the nineteenth century. Baby farming and child murder both broke the gender norms that society took so seriously as well as played into the division of class based on a perceived lack of morality combined with desperation, but baby farming, not child murder, became such a scandal because of the reaction of the press. By creating a panic in the public eye, these women were damned as a perversion of nature.

Although the premise was incredibly similar, infanticide and baby farming were seen as two very different things in Britain in the nineteenth century. Murdering one’s own child was given a lot more sympathy in the public’s eye because there were certain explanations that could be given to quiet their conscience and remove guilt from the mother. Firstly, the child could have died through no fault of the mother’s due to childbirth. Complications during birth were not uncommon and although unfortunate, the mother could not be blamed for it. Another explanation, and one that was exceedingly popular, was the notion of puerperal insanity. Women were regarded as the weaker sex, and therefore their mind was more susceptible to corruption and mental illness. “Women suffering from puerperal insanity noted how they struggled with forces urging self-destruction, or the murder of their infants or other family members, and how they were assailed with premonitions about the deaths of loved ones or longing for their own deaths.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Childbirth, being difficult and painful, was closely related with mental illness because it was seen as traumatic. Mental illness was the natural next step in a society that believed women were weak. Puerperal insanity quickly became a fashionable disorder and because increasingly over-diagnosed, even in such cases where delirium or fever were the more likely candidates.[[3]](#footnote-3) When women were put on trial for the murder of a child, even if they were sentenced to hang, very few actually did. Often times, the punishment was reduced to prison time. Even more typically, they were charged with concealment of birth or infanticide which only carried a fine as punishment. The reason it was not punished the way it should have been was because “it was by far the easiest type [of murder] to hide and, in its traditional form, the least threatening to the general public.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Baby farming, contrarily, was taken incredibly seriously. As stated in *The Spectator*, “infanticide, no doubt, has in all ages and most countries been the despair of legislators; but the slaughter of babies by professional murderesses who work for a specified fee is not infanticide, but murder for money, and can be put down, like any other form of that crime…infanticide when committed by the mother is not murder.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Baby farming first appeared in 1847 with the case of Ann Barnes. She poisoned a number of babies that were in her care and when the parents were confronted, they did not seem too upset about it. Although it was clear that the children died of arsenic poisoning, Barnes was never tried. Instead, it was concluded that they were poisoned by an “unknown person,” as this kind of case was still seen as outlandish.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although Barnes’ case was the first, it was the case of Margaret Waters in 1870 that really made a legal breakthrough in the world of baby farming. She was tried for the “willful murder of John Walter Cowen,” a child left in her care, and found guilty of this murder.[[7]](#footnote-7) She was the first woman sentenced to hang for baby farming, and even though it was seen as a heinous crime, some people still thought the punishment was a little extreme. In this case, the grandfather or John Walter Cowen took an interest in what happened to the child and followed up on how he was doing. This is what caused Walters to be caught, but she and her sister “admitted to having ‘adopted’ about forty children. Many of these disappeared…To save on burial expenses, they had been leaving dead bodies around the neighborhood: sixteen were found in the month before they were caught.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Margaret Waters was seen as an abomination to have killed so many children for money and, as such, was turned into a scapegoat by becoming the first woman to hang for baby farming.

Gender and class were the two major reasons that baby farming was so shocking. Especially when it came to gender, people were incredibly intrigued. “Whereas murder by a man frightened the public, murder by a woman, unless it could be explained by insanity, aroused indignation.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Gender played an excessively important role in how events were perceived. Women were known to be the more passive, gentle, weak minded, and moral sex. They were the gate keepers to sexuality and their most important role was to be a mother. Crime, especially murder, went against everything that their gender stood for. Most damning was the murder of a child, as here they were going against their very nature of motherhood. “Such women, having betrayed the trust of their nearest and dearest, could not be understood as women, and so they were loudly derided as traitors of their sex.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Although it is true that women did have an easier time getting away with crime, when they were indeed found guilty they were treated as absolute monsters and were treated even worse than men were treated. They were not only punished for whatever crime they had committed, but they were also punished for going against how their gender was supposed to behave. The only way a woman could be found guilty of a crime and not be treated as badly was if she could be found criminally insane. In this situation, she was merely a victim of her own weak mind, thus conforming to the gender stereotypes. In order to preserve the idea of femininity, a murderess was presented as a witch because “gentle, submissive, passive, self-sacrificing, delicate creatures do not strangle babies with their bare hands and drop them into the river.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Class was another huge indicator of why people reacted the way they did. The working class was thought to be the main source of crime in Victorian Britain. The fact that the main offenders in baby farming were not only women but working class women was yet another incriminating factor for the poor. Working class women were certainly not the only ones to sell their babies to baby farmers, but they did make up the majority of those who did. Baby farmer clientele were mostly prostitutes, servants, factory hands, or unfaithful wives of absent husbands.[[12]](#footnote-12) Those who got rid of their babies were usually not keen on ever seeing the child again. Often ashamed, they leave the child with a baby farmer, along with the proper fee, and never check up on the child. This, unfortunately, made it incredibly easy to kill the child since no one was looking for it. Consequently, “these were difficult cases for the police to crack, since bereaved mothers who had wanted their babies murdered were unlikely to complain to the authorities, and bereaved mothers who had wanted their babies preserved could not risk the publicity of an inquest and trial.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Baby farmers were protected by the fear of exposure in mothers. The general public would have been sympathetic to these mothers’ case, but being part of the working class they carried all of the social stigmatisms of such: poor, lazy, immoral, and promiscuous women who should not have gotten pregnant in the first place. The middle class, although less often, did rid themselves of their children in this way too. “While few middle-class women were likely to abandon unwanted infants in the Regent’s canal, they were known to make use of baby farmers along with poorer women.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

What made baby farming such a scandal in the eyes of the public when child murder was hardly even considered a crime? Gender and class were two major factors that contributed to the public unrest when it came to this type of murder, but they were also factors in infanticide. What was the difference? The biggest reason that people were so unhappy about baby farming was press coverage. “Infanticide was generally condoned as a fairly private crime of little threat to the general public, but aggressive reporting about baby farming in the 1860s fanned it into a national scandal.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Newspaper articles, broadsides, journals, ‘penny dreadfuls’, and medical writings all wrote about baby farming and how dreadful and scandalous it was, therefore creating a moral panic in the public. These “moral panics” were not uncommon in industrial societies. They appear when events that are known as threats to society appear and while “some panics respond to novel situations, …others react to entrenched problems.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Baby farming was referred to in one British Medical Journal as ‘evil.’ Newspaper articles referred to the victims as ‘unhappy children.’ An article in *The Spectator* refers to it as ‘the slaughter of babies.’ All of this language subconsciously affects the public’s opinion of the crime. When it came to infanticide, “the press operated from the premise that women were not in control of their actions while committing crimes…[whereas] women who killed their children or husbands were accused of having sunk to the very depths of society.”[[17]](#footnote-17) When a woman killed her own child, madness could be blamed and this is exactly how the media portrayed it. When a woman killed another’s child, insanity could not be used as a plea, and so they were guilty in full for their crime.

The language used in newspapers directly reveals what those who wrote the article thought of the person charged with a crime, and therefore directly influenced what the public thought of that person. This is evident in the case of Margaret Waters. She was believed to be guilty, and consequently, the articles written about her portray as such. As written in *Penny Illustrated* from London, England, “she did not betray any emotion while undergoing the operation of pinioning, and appeared to have recovered all the firmness that characterized her during the trial.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Since women were known to be emotional, not rational, beings, the fact that they wrote about how she did not show emotion and was instead very firm betrays what they think of her. They believe her to be backwards and contrary to her nature. In Dublin, Ireland, the *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* states that “she was a plain woman, almost ugly, with a sinister cast of features, and her face was ghastly pale and spotted with great red patches from watching and weeping…She was a common, vulgar woman as far as I could judge, but she bore herself bravely.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In Victorian England, if someone looked like a bad person, they were believed to be a bad person. They describe her as common, vulgar, plain, and almost ugly. This depicts exactly what a bad person would look like. Finally, the *Western Mail* in Cardiff, Wales, recounts that “The unhappy woman was supported on her right…and on her left…but though pale and weak, she scarcely needed their assistance to guide her footsteps. Indeed, throughout she manifested the greatest firmness.”[[20]](#footnote-20) They describe her as being firm, which, again, would be contrary to what a woman should be. Especially at her execution, she should be weeping or showing some sort of emotion. But they write that she remains firm, thus betraying where they believed the guilt lay. All across Britain the case of the Margret Waters, the Baby Farmer was reported thus proving just how much of a scandal this case was. As a woman who so completely went against her own sex’s nature, she was abhorred.

Broadsides were another place where Margaret Waters’ crime was advertised, making her scandal even more ghastly. “Broadsides, fixed on walls in homes, inns, and coffee houses or outdoors on posts, were as much about entertainment as information.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Baby farming was known to be evil by this point, and a broadside written about Margaret Waters and her sister entitled “Mothers Beware,” read:

“In a terrace, at Brixton, two sisters did dwell And of their sad doings the newspapers tell. How they tempted poor mothers their offspring to leave, To their tender care, but alas to deceive. They starved them to death, for of late has been found, The bodies of infants in the fields there around.

Poor children half-naked, their state we deplore , Too weak for to stand, they laid on the floor Unwashed and neglected by night and by day Till their dear little souls from life pass away And what cared the nurse for the dead ones, not she, The death of a child, why a saving would be.

Will the hen drive the chicken from under her wing And leave it to perish, the poor little thing, Or will dumb brutes desert their offspring, ah! no, What proofs of affection animals show. Yet mothers alas their children will slay, Or else pay another to put it away.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

This broadside is clearly against Margaret Waters. It would have been such a shocking piece of writing, but also one that really influences the public, especially when it’s used as entertainment. This piece of poetry demonstrates how unnatural she is for murdering a child. Even animals would never do such a thing, therefore, she truly is a monster. In terms of the mothers who sell their babies to people such as Waters, it begins by saying that they are tricked into doing so and then their child is mercilessly killed. Later on in the poem is accuses those same mothers as being just as bad for giving away their children in the first place. Altogether, press like this, along with others, created outrage in the general public. What resulted was a scandal of huge proportion.

The legal response to the rise in Baby Farmers was to create new laws to try to contain and prevent people from profiting off of murdering babies. The “Infant Life Protection Society” (ILPS) was formed in response to the Waters case. Their sole purpose was to create some sort of control to stop baby farming, which was a direct response to the general fear that was growing around the subject. In 1872, the Infant Life Protection Act came to pass, requiring all Baby Farmers to register and encouraging all police to act if they suspected someone of child murder, although it was not successful in stopping or regulating child adoption.[[23]](#footnote-23) The moral panic that accompanied baby farming helped to inspire change, and the ILPS worked to make that happen. Some people were not fond of the law since they believed it disrupted private life, but the ILPS insisted that baby farming was a business and needed to be treated as such.[[24]](#footnote-24) The bill only passed once it was reduced in severity.

Margaret Waters’ execution was meant to set a precedent and to scare others like her so that they would stop profiting off of baby murders. In reality, all that came of it was that those in the business became more careful. Newspapers were the mediun in which adoption advertisements were placed and answered, but after the Waters’ case it became disgraceful for a newspaper to carry such advertisements. Although they disappeared from some newspapers, in others they were just coded. In an interview with Sargent Relf, the detective who discovered Margaret Waters, the *Derby Mercury* gave an example of such an advertisement:

“Comfortable home for a lady - well furnished drawing-room floor or bedroom to be let, with attendance. Healthy situation, large garden, near a station.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

This is not an advertisement that would catch someone’s eye unless they know the key words they should be looking for. In this case, the key word is “attendance,” to let readers know exactly what kind of ad it is. Another example would be:

“Comfortable home offered; superior residence, long established; receive invalid gentleman or lady requiring kind care and attention; highest medical and other (references – Address, &c)”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Here, “requiring kind care and attention” indicates that it is an adoption advertisement. Although these kinds of ads can be found, they are said not to appear in “respectable” newspapers.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Baby Farming became a scandal of such magnitude because of how thoroughly and aggressively the press covered the material. The reason the press covered these stories was directly connected to its ties to class divisions and gender. Victorian Britain took class divisions incredibly seriously and more often than not, the poor were blamed for problems in crime, murder being no exception. When gender norms were broken alongside class division, the whole case became blown out of proportion. Baby farming was such an issue in Victorian society because it involved not only the murder of a child, but the profit off of the murder of someone else’s child. Before baby farming appears, infanticide was the number one reason women are found guilty of murder, but it was not seen as a true crime. With the defense of puerperal insanity, most women, whether actually suffering from it or not, got away with murdering their children. These crimes, although gruesome, were not committed out of greed. More often than not, this was an economic crime that was committed out of necessity on the part of the mother. She murdered her child out of desperation since she was so poor that she could not afford to feed this child. However unfortunate, the public had a much easier time sympathizing with infanticide rather than baby farming out of a mutual understanding for gender norms. They understood that the woman, being the weaker sex, was reacting emotionally rather than rationally. In a male dominated world, women in the nineteenth century had no other option than to become victims of a masculine idea of how to behave, and when they broke that expectation, scandal ensued.

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