**The Unconventional Case of Francois Benjamin Courvoisier**

**The Murder of Lord William Russell and the Archetypes of the Victorian Criminal**

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During May, 1840, in London, England Lord William Russell, an elderly, former British politician was discovered murdered in his bed. The chief suspect was his Swiss valet of only five weeks, Francois Benjamin Courvoisier, whose guilt in the murder was determined using circumstantial evidence.[[1]](#footnote-2) Many of Russell’s valuables for instance, had been found stashed throughout several areas of the house that Courvoisier frequently visited, while marks of forced entry matched those of a chisel found in the valet’s possession.[[2]](#footnote-3) However, Courvoisier was also an unconventional suspect, whose rejection of the traditional criminal archetype led Victorian society to alter Courvoisier’s case in order to meet these ideals.

In this regard, this paper will explore three ways in which Courvoisier challenged the criminal archetype, and the means by which Victorian society restructured Courvoisier’s case within these definitions. First, it will examine appearance, and how Courvoisier’s physical features did not correspond with the image Victorians expected criminals to portray. Secondly, this paper will look at Courvoisier as a foreigner, and how his subversion of the characteristics considered indicative of criminals of this status. Finally, this paper will examine the issue of class, and how Courvoisier’s occupation as both a Valet and low-class foreigner existed in contradiction to how murderers were expected to behave. One element this paper will not argue was whether Courvoisier was indeed guilty in Russell’s murder. Instead, it will illustrate how Courvoisier’s criminal status subverted Victorian beliefs, and how these ideals came to be altered in order to encompass the former valet.

The first way in which Courvoisier subverted Victorian trends was that he did not meet the expectation of how criminals were supposed to appear. In his discussion of the criminal, Havelock Ellis voices his belief that criminals could be identified by their poor or malformed physical appearances, including characteristics such as large faces or ears, and other abnormalities.[[3]](#footnote-4) However, accounts of the crime indicate nothing particularly odd about Courvoisier’s appearance. Indeed, if the Victorian criminal was supposed to be visibly malformed, than Courvoisier could be said to have been the opposite. This is evident in the account of Inspector Henry Beresford, who during his investigation of William Russell’s murder took specific note of Courvoisier’s physical appearance. In his depiction, Beresford describes Courvoisier as having “dark hair and eyes,” and specifically mentions how the valet had “regular handsome features.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Far from being having any abnormalities, Courvoisier’s appearance was not indicative of how Victorian criminals were supposed to appear, therefore making him an outlier in this regard.

However, accounts of Courvoisier’s trial also indicate an attempt to draw the former valet closer to this expected appearance. At the onset of the case, Courvoisier’s appearance was that of a handsome man. However, as criminal proceedings continued he took on a ragged appearance that brought him closer to Ellis’ definition. For example, one account of Russell’s murder notes how the death shattered Courvoisier carefully constructed demeanour, leaving him a wreck of his former self.[[5]](#footnote-6) More pertinently, when Courvoisier arrived for his trial the following month, he did so after experiencing drastic changes to his physical appearance. One spectator, Henry Sweyn, noted how the formerly attractive Courvoisier had become pale and anxious, and looked to be especially” physically worn”.[[6]](#footnote-7) Sweyn does not say that Courvoisier was unrecognizable, but his appearance had evidently been altered into a less familiar form that helmed closer to the accepted notion of what the Victorian criminal was supposed to look like.

The second area in which Courvoisier did not meet the archetype of the criminal had to do with his foreign background. Foreigners, during Britain as this time, were known to have a number of undesirable qualities, all of which were thought to make them more susceptible to impulsive behaviours such as crime and murder. The text, *Fear, Loathing and Victorian Xenophobia*, lists a number of these characteristics thought common among foreigners who engaged in crime, including a love of gambling, perpetual poverty, improvidence, as well as a lack of education.[[7]](#footnote-8) For Victorians, the foreigner existed on the fringes of Society, which made it odd that Courvoisier, who was both employed and out of poverty, would attempt to commit such a crime.

As a foreigner, the first way that Courvoisier deviated from the criminal archetype had to do with his reasonable mastery of English. For many foreigners who committed crimes during this period, it would appear that this was not particular common. Xenophobia directed toward foreigners often had to do with their lack of language skills, which was considered a sign of both mental and intellectual inferiority.[[8]](#footnote-9) Evidence that criminals and language were linked is evident in several transcripts of murder cases for foreigners held the Old Bailey. One such example, is the murder case of Giuseppe Remorino and Emanuel Antola which tied together the “unintelligible” and drunken qualities of its Italian suspects.[[9]](#footnote-10) In either case, the crime of the foreign criminal is discussed in accordance with their linguistic abilities, which, when combined with Victorian xenophobic sentiment, indicates a link between foreign criminals and linguistic ability.

In Courvoisier’s case however, a lack of language could not be used to describe his case. As one inspector noted at the crime, Courvoisier spoke “extremely good English” which was considered unusual given that Courvoisier came from a French-speaking canton.[[10]](#footnote-11) Because of this, Courvoisier had the unique ability to defend his actions at the crime scene, which could not be said for a number of his foreign contemporaries. However, it is also curious to note that this detail is inconsistent. Whereby one account describes Courvoisier’s strong language skills another contrastingly states that Courvoisier had very little knowledge of English, and spoke with an evident accent.[[11]](#footnote-12) Whether Courvoisier spoke English or not; that these two depictions differ show the intent of Victorians investigators to connect Courvoisier’s crime with his proficiency at English, a quality which would have aligned more closely with the Victorian expectation of the foreign criminal.

In addition to low levels of English, another commonality of crimes committed by foreigners was thought to be the involvement of alcoholic consumption. Not every crime with a foreigner meant that alcohol played a role, however this was generally believed to be the case. Victorian researchers, such as Havelock Ellis, purported the idea that “crime and drink” were “intimately bound together” and accounts of foreign murderers in the Old Bailey show that alcohol did come to play a role in trials.[[12]](#footnote-13) For example, the case of William Stolzer, in which Stolzer’s crime of stabbing another individual was shown to have been connected to his drunken state at the time.[[13]](#footnote-14) By examining a number of murders committed by Foreigners in the mid-1800’s it is evident many were influenced by alcohol to some degree. When combined with Ellis’ beliefs this creates the notion that foreign, crime and drink were all inherently linked; a permutation which Courvoisier did not adhere to.

In contrast to these depictions, Courvoisier was not shown to be inebriated at the time of the crime. Before the murder, the general consensus of accounts is that Courvoisier did dine and have teas with a friend, but neither the account of Russell’s cook or housemaid indicates that this meeting involved alcohol which would have directly influenced Russell’s murder.[[14]](#footnote-15) At one point the accounts do mention that Courvoisier did bring back some beer to the house, but it does not say that he actively partook of the substance, which was brought in at the request of Russell’s cook. [[15]](#footnote-16) Without strong evidence for alcoholic consumption, is usage could not be tied to Courvoisier’s criminal pursuits, although the presence of this topic in newspapers indicates a purposeful attempt to tie the two together.

With this said, the accounts of the murder and trial indicate that the prosecution did attempt to alter the concept of alcoholic consumption to determine Courvoisier’s guilt. As shown by a copy of the *Era*, published soon after the crime, one of the questions by Inspector Henry Beresford had to do whether the valet (Courvoisier) had been known for consuming alcohol. In Beresford’s questioning of the cook, he directly inquired what Courvoisier’s drinking habits were like, to which Haell (the cook) responded that the valet did not have a reputation for drinking.[[16]](#footnote-17) However, this evidence illustrates that alcohol was being considered in Courvoisier’s account; if not because of his nationality, but because of a stereotype generated by foreigners who did commit major crimes under alcoholic consumption.

Most pertinently, the case of alcohol and murder does show up again during Courvoisier’s trial. At this point, the testimony does indicate he himself had not been heavily drinking in lieu of the murder, but the transcript does show an obvious attempt to link alcohol to the crime. In this case, the link comes from the testimony given by Russell’s former housemaid Sarah Mancer. Whereas her previous testimony said nothing about Courvoisier drinking, during the trial it suddenly came up that the two of them had decided to partake of drinks immediately following the crime. According to Mancer, the ale Courvoisier had given her had made her extremely sleepy, which the prosecution took to understand that the Valet had attempted to drug her in order to escape from the crime.[[17]](#footnote-18) However, if this was the case, it is difficult to see why Courvoisier would have chosen to remain at Russell’s residence until inspectors arrived. As this drinking episode shows up nowhere else in Mancer’s previous accounts, it gives the indication of having been specifically constructed for the purposes the trial, as if to prove that Courvoisier really did meet the stereotype of the inebriated foreign criminal.

The final indication that the courts wanted Courvoisier prosecuted was that not doing so would have gone against the Victorian perceptions of class. In this regard, the issue was not whether Courvoisier had killed Lord William Russell, but rather that Russell, a wealthy, former politician was deceased, and that one of the key suspects was a foreigner and lower class valet. If the case was one of a foreigner killing another foreigner, odds are the case would not have become so sensational, given that the lives of lower-class foreigner were considered unequal to those of natural born, English citizens.[[18]](#footnote-19) One example of this is the 1868 trial of murderer John Morelli, who received reduced charges pertaining to his crime simply because he was Italian, a foreigner, and therefore, “did not know any better.”[[19]](#footnote-20) As it was, Courvoisier was convicted of murdering an individual of significantly higher status than he, which made it an unusual case in regards to how lower class foreigners were seen to commit crime

In this sense, the need for Courvoisier to be tried and executed was in direct correlation to Russell’s considerably higher status. This was not a case of a foreigner killing a foreigner, but rather of a low-level servant having murdered an individual of a considerably higher class. Not only was Lord William Russell was former Whig politician, but he also had a personal connections to the British Secretary of the colonies, who also happened to be his nephew. [[20]](#footnote-21) Further implicating Courvoisier’s case, was also the fact that Russell was also an elderly individual, and part of a demographic whose murder was considered an “intolerable acts” within the Victorian populace.[[21]](#footnote-22) Between Russell’s age and status, the trial had all the indications of a sensationalist event. It even attracted huge crowds inside and outside of the courtroom.[[22]](#footnote-23) This said, these elements also indicate a society firmly stacked against any form of acquittal for Courvoisier, who, to the Victorians, had directly violated criminal convention in murdering an unorthodox target.

However, it is difficult to say whether Courvoisier would have been spared had the murder been of someone else. Courvoisier was a foreigner, but the Victorians also expected different behaviours from foreigners’ dependant on where one was from. As Martin J. Wiener points out in one article, how a Victorians perceived European foreigner often had to do with how English that individual could be perceived as being.[[23]](#footnote-24) That is to say those individuals who spoke and looked British had a better reputation among the English than other non-British Europeans who were thought to be impulsive, hot-headed and with a “primitive sense of honour.”[[24]](#footnote-25) For a foreigner, Courvoisier tended more towards British than European; he spoke very good English, and gave little indication in his appearance that he came from the continent.[[25]](#footnote-26) More pertinently, was even if he was not British, he was Swiss, and according to the officials at his trial there were no people “more free from crime than they.”[[26]](#footnote-27) To these ends, Courvoisier was not a conventional target for prosecution. He was a foreigner and suspected murder, but not one that was expected to commit a crime, based on where he was from and his evidently English refinement.

Indeed, Courvoisier’s very existence as a servant would have been entirely unusual for those trying to find a motivation for the crime. The idea that it was Courvoisier, a lowly valet who committed the murder went against the nature of the Victorian process for selecting servants, which placed the onus on the maters to select the appropriate candidate. Entering into the employment of the rich was not considered easy, and the frequently the process involved the individual having to procure several character references, as well as commit to a face-to-face interview with the employer.[[27]](#footnote-28) To pass this test, and then to found to be guilty of murder, indicated a failure on behalf of the murdered individual, and made Courvoisier’s criminal status all the more unconventional.

In this sense, Courvoisier’s trial worked to protect Russell’s reputation in such a way to ensure that Courvoisier would be found in the wrong. To say that Courvoisier simply killed Russell was equivalent to condemning the latter, so it was imperative to show Courvoisier as being the one responsible for violating these conventions. It is notable in this case, that many of the questions asked by prosecutors had to do with money, and specifically how much knowledge Courvoisier had of his master’s finances, as well as the money found in Courvoisier possession during the crime.[[28]](#footnote-29) In any other case, the question may be innocuous, but here it directly addresses the existence of theft during the murder, which would have consequently shifted the blame to Courvoisier, given the strong Victorian taboo about servants stealing from their masters.[[29]](#footnote-30) Here, the presence of money in the investigation symbolizes a purposeful attempt to transfer guilt onto Courvoisier, who faced the unusual position of not being found at fault.

In conclusion, the case of Francois Benjamin Courvoisier represents a deviation to the process by which Victorians determined criminal guilt. Although designated a murderer, Courvoisier did not meet the conventional archetype of a killer, but functions as an example of how Victorians transformed these conventions in order to make them applicable to such outliers. For Courvoisier, this included Victorians speculating about the changes to his physical appearance, as well as an increased emphasis on both his status as a foreigner as well as that of a low class individual. Courvoisier’s status as a foreigner, in this case, was greatly exacerbated during the investigation into Russell’s death, which at various points tried to link his crime to the alcoholic habits and low language skills expected of foreign Victorian criminals. However, Courvoisier was very much the victim of circumstance as well, and had, by means of association, become involved in a sensationalist trial intent on seeing him convicted. If the murder had involved a man of lesser status than Russell, Courvoisier very well may have received more liberal treatment. However, because of the former’s high class he faced the unusual case in which his guilt was all but presumed through his association with what was considered an unconventional target for murder. An exception to the Victorian idea of a murderer, Courvoisier subverted public presumptions about criminality, and led the society of the time to transform his case in order to meet these needs.

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