“Lady Macbeth of Bermondsey” and “The Thing Who Was Her Husband”: Gendered Representations of Maria and Frederick Manning

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Introduction

On or around 9 August 1849, Patrick O'Connor was murdered in 3 Miniver Place, the home of Maria and Frederick Manning, a married couple and friends of the victim. Police inspectors found his body buried underneath the hearth flagstones in the kitchen; he had been shot in the head and then beaten to death with what would later turn out to be a crowbar, fracturing his skull into more than sixteen pieces.[1] By the time inspectors discovered O'Connor's body the Mannings had fled - Maria to Scotland, taking O'Connor's valuables with her, and Frederick to Jersey. Each was eventually captured and brought to trial. They were found guilty and hanged for the crime 13 November 1849, the first time a married couple had been executed together in England in fifty years.

The Manning case was a sensation, with an unprecedented number of people attending their execution, including Charles Dickens, John Forster, Herman Melville, William Thackeray, and a six-year-old Thomas Hardy.[2] Important members of the nobility and even foreign princes (Metternich of Austria) were present in court during the trial. Immediately after the execution, wax figures of Maria and Frederick were added to Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors. Maria's figure, clothed in her own dresses and standing in a model of the kitchen where O'Connor had been buried, remained on display until 1971, the longest-running murderess of the Chamber.[3] The

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[1] *The Times*, 22 August, 1849, 5. The surgeon who performed the autopsy told the inquest that O'Connor's skull was fractured into so many pieces that he grew tired of pulling them all out, stopping at sixteen fragments.

[2] Anna Kay, "True Crime in Bermondsey: Representations of Maria Manning," *Clues* 31, no. 2 (2013): 33; Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians*: *Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 81. Crone estimates that 30,000 people attended the Manning execution.

[3] Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*: *The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 23.

fascination with the Mannings has not ended there, however; in 2015 an episode of the true crime television show *Murder Maps* was devoted to the case.[4]

Despite how sensational the Manning case was at the time, and to an extent continues to be today, previous literature on the Manning case is minimal. With limited work on the Manning case itself, this paper relies on the historiography of nineteenth-century gender and crime to put the case in context and understand its importance. Susie Steinbach's seminal text provides an overview of the lives of English women from 1760-1914, while Elizabeth Foyster's work on marital violence examines prescriptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as ideologies of sexuality and domesticity that speak to the ways men and women were expected to act both individually and within a marriage. Lucia Zedner offers insight into the way middle-class Victorians theorized links between women, crime, and sexuality, proving invaluable to any project that examines female perpetrators of violent crime. In terms of ideologies of masculinity, John Tosh provides an overview of how manliness was understood in nineteenth century Britain, and Martin Wiener examines constructions of masculinity in relation to violence and crime.[5]

The framework of this paper stems partially from the work of Mary Poovey, who argues that gender representations are a site at which broader societal ideologies are both formed and resisted, but pushes back against her view that individuals are "merely points at which competing

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[4] *Murder Maps*, 1, "The Bermondsey Horror," directed by Daniel Kontur and written by William Simpson, aired 24 November 2015.

[5] Susie Steinbach, *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004); Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence: an English Family History, 1660-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005); Martin Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

cultural forces intersect."[6] Adopting this framework, but acknowledging the role the Mannings played in the resistance of these ideologies, allows us to understand why this case sustained such long-term interest.

This paper builds on the work of Anna Kay, one of the only scholars to explore the Manning case in depth.[7] Kay examines literary representations of the Mannings to argue that representations of Maria offer insight into Victorian ideas about gender, sexuality, and criminality. She further argues that the impossibility of understanding Maria's gender within established categories of identity generated alarm among contemporaries and this alarm caused representations of Maria to be varied and complex.[8] This paper instead argues that this complexity was the result of press and legal representations of Frederick and Maria being shaped by the Mannings themselves. In order to demonstrate this clearly, this paper will examine the gendered representations of the Mannings at three different points in the story: when the couple was at large, when they were present in court, and after their deaths. Each of these periods is significant. While the Mannings were at large, the press and the legal system were able to draw on dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, and criminology to create gendered portraits of Frederick and Maria that defied resistance. It was not until Maria and Frederick were arrested that this began to change. Each of the Mannings harnessed the same dominant discourses to construct representations of

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[6] Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3, 20.

[7] There are only two book-length accounts of the Manning case. Albert Borowitz provides a narrative of the case without a substantial consideration of gender, while Michael Alpert's book is more of a study of the year 1849 than it is of the Manning case. Albert Borowitz, *The Woman Who Murdered Black Satin: The Bermondsey Horror* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981); Michael Alpert, *London, 1849: A Victorian Murder Story* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004).

[8] Kay, 34, 42.

themselves which were able to resist and interrupt those created by the press and the legal system. The success of this resistance is evident in the posthumous literary representations of Maria in particular. Even in death, when both newspaper and popular presses were able to discursively do as they pleased with the couple, Maria's self-presentation continued to shape narratives of the case to the end of the Victorian period.

CHAPTER I: Before the Mannings, 18-23 August 1849

This chapter is concerned with early representations of the Mannings in *The Times* from 18 to 23 August 1849. Although short, this period is critical to our understanding of the way that representations of the Mannings changed over the duration of the case. In this early period, neither of the Mannings is physically present to either interrupt or to affirm the ways in which they are discussed, and *The Times* drew on prevailing Victorian perceptions and ideas about femininity, masculinity, and criminology to construct representations of them. As a result, the early representations of the Mannings presented by *The Times* fit conventional early Victorian understandings of gendered behaviour, appearance, and methods of murder.

The Times first reported the discovery of O'Connor's body on 18 August 1849. This first report does not give us a physical description of the Mannings, but it already argues that there "can hardly be any doubt that Manning or his wife committed the murder" and provides a *behavioural* portrait of the Mannings. It immediately draws particular attention to Maria's relationship to O'Connor; he is described as being "especially in the company of Mrs. Manning," and *The Times* is careful to tell its reader that it was not unusual for Maria to be present at O'Connor's lodging when O'Connor was not at home.[9] Thus, in even the first report of the case, rumours of a too-intimate relationship between the pair were being circulated in the press. This itself is a gendered representation; Victorian understandings of crime viewed female criminality as tied directly to sexual impropriety - so much so, that assessments of a woman's sexual conduct were used as a measurement of the depth of criminality she possessed. Zedner argues that this link

[9] *The Times*, 18 August 1849: 5.

between female crime and sexual morality led to the characterization of all criminal women as sexually deviant.

The representation of Frederick's behaviour in this account also draws on dominant ideologies of gender and crime. *The Times* points out that the Mannings were aware of O'Connor's wealth, and that Frederick had been dismissed from his position as a guard on the Great Western Railway Company for his potential involvement in robberies of this line.[10] This suggestion that the motive for murder was robbery, and the implication that Frederick had already been involved in a crime of this type, tied both the motive and Frederick to the perceived 'masculine' trait of avariciousness.[11] *The Times* also reports that, before the discovery of the body, the police had been told that Frederick had made threats against O'Connor. Threats and violence between men of the working classes were relatively common place in the early Victorian period, and there existed still a cultural belief in a man's right to fight.[12] Both Maria and Frederick were represented in gendered ways even in the first newspaper report on the case, and more significantly, these representations were not contested.

This representation of Maria's behaviour, and therefore her character, continues in the next report in the *Times*, published two days later, also contests part of the first one. Maria is described as "a fine-grown, handsome woman, and considered very accomplished among the society in which she lived."[13] *The Times* does not indicate where this description of Maria came from, but as

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[10] *The Times*, 18 August 1849: 5.
[11] Zedner, 23. Victorians believed women less likely to steal due to a lower degree of acquisitiveness than men.
[12] Ibid; John E. Archer, "'Men Behaving Badly'?: Masculinity and the Uses of Violence, 1850-1900," in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender and Class* ed. Shani D'Cruze (London: Longman, 2000), 43, 52; Wiener, 28.
[13] *The Times*, 20 August 1849: 6.

neither of the Mannings were present to provide it, we must assume that it came from members of the community in which they lived. Community played a large role in observing and determining the respectability of working-class women and families in the nineteenth century, so it is worth emphasizing that, even while *The Times* was insisting on her guilt in a murder, Maria was considered both 'fine-grown' and 'handsome' by locals and neighbours, terms which could call forth notions of integrity.[14] This is even more striking when we consider the implications of Maria's sexual immorality made by *The Times* just two days prior. According to early Victorian ideologies, which constructed women as disinterested in sex (unless for procreative purposes) and submissive to the authority of their husbands, a sexually passionate and adulterous woman should have been considered outside the bounds of feminine respectability. This was a clear moment of resistance to the way the press had previously discussed Maria's behaviour, and because it came from the community in which she lived, it allows us to see a gap between lived experienced and gender prescriptions. Another moment of resistance happens when Pierce Walsh, a friend of O'Connor and the Mannings, denied the allegation that O'Connor and Maria were intimate when asked about their relationship at the inquest. These moments of denial allow historians a view of the ways middle-class ideologies of gender and crime were shifting and unstable. The press, however, continued to charge Maria with sexual impropriety, and the legal system similarly took up these discourses.

This second report also gives the first physical descriptions of both Frederick and Maria. These are the descriptions that were circulated by police during their manhunt for the couple. Frederick is described as "stout" with a "fair and florid complexion, full-bloated face, light hair [...]

[14] Steinbach, 13.

and a peculiar form of the eyelids at the corners." Maria is also described as stout, though "good-looking" and "dressed very smartly." In contrast to her husband, she is said to have a "fresh complexion" with "long dark hair."[15] Neither of these descriptions were unusually gendered at this time, which is in itself significant. So far, *The Times* has written that either Frederick *or* Maria had committed the murder, meaning that Maria's potential guilt or role in this murder is still unclear, allowing *The Times* and the police to describe her as attractive. If her guilt had been obvious at this early point, the press would have mobilized discourses of female criminality to describe Maria as masculine and unattractive.[16] Criminological discourses of women and murder were also used in later press reports that attempt to understand how both Frederick and Maria could be involved in O'Connor's murder.

Press discussions of the crime began to shift, moving from the idea that one of the Mannings had murdered O'Connor to the idea that both Mannings had been involved in some way. At this point, however, there is still no indication that anyone writing on the case was entertaining the idea that Maria had been involved in the more violent parts of O'Connor' death - the shooting and the beating. These two methods of murder were characterized as 'masculine'. For early Victorians, who believed that women were naturally passive, this would have pushed back against the idea that both Mannings had acted in this murder. But an apparent resolution to this ideological difficulty was at hand. Beginning with *The Times* article dated 22 August, there was a

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[15] *The Times*, 20 August 1849, 6.

[16] Zedner, 76-82; Lizzie Seal, *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24. Both Zedner and Lizzie Seal point to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries respectively as the time that this turn in criminological understandings of criminal women as masculine, but the press was trying to apply this discourse of masculinization to Maria in the late 1840s.

suggestion that O'Connor had actually been drugged before he was murdered, and particular attention was paid to a cut-glass perfume bottle containing one ounce of laudanum. This is important because poison was considered a woman's weapon in nineteenth-century England.[17] If both Mannings were guilty, Maria must have been involved in a way that was coded as feminine, hence the suggestion that O'Connor had been drugged, in order to facilitate his violent murder, by a soporific contained in a perfume bottle - a woman's weapon in a woman's container. The perfume bottle was mentioned again by *The Times* on 23 August, the last report we have before Maria is before the courts.[18] Even before either of the Mannings had been present in court, the newspaper press was using gendered representations, in this case of particular types of violence, in their narrative of the case.

While the *Times* was constructing gendered representations of the Mannings from the beginning of the press coverage of their case, at this early period these press representations were not unusual or unexpected. Without either of the couple available for scrutiny, *The Times* was able to create these representations by combining their limited knowledge of the case with early Victorian discourses of femininity, masculinity, and criminality. Even though the working-class community of Bermondsey refuted the idea of Maria as sexually immoral by speaking of her integrity or actively denying the reported affair, this resistance was unable to shape further press reports. It was not until the Mannings were present to represent themselves, through both their

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[17] This was especially the case in the 1840s, a time of moral panic over a perceived ring of female poisoners. For a discussion of the link between women and poison in the Victorian era, as well as an overview of this moral panic, see Victoria M. Nagy, "Narratives in the Courtroom: Female Poisoners in Mid-Nineteenth Century England," *European Journal of Criminology* 11, no. 2 (2014): 213-227 and George Robb, "Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisoning in Victorian England," *Journal of Family History*, 22 (1997): 176-90

[18] *The Times*, 22 August 1849, 5; *The Times*, 23 August 1849, 4.

words and their physical embodiment, that the press and the legal system had to shift their representations of the couple.

CHAPTER II: Enter the Mannings, 24 August - 13 November 1849

In this period, the Mannings added their defence of themselves to those constructed by the press and the legal system. This introduction of the Mannings into the narratives constructed about them serves to widen the gap between dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, and criminality, on the one hand, and actual lived experience on the other, thereby rendering the systems and structures that give rise to these discourses visible. Maria's own words and embodied femininity destabilized press attempts to situate her in the criminological discourse of the masculine murderess, while the narrative Frederick told of his role in the murder, coupled with his body language in the courtroom, destabilized prevailing discourses of acceptable masculinity. By beginning with Maria and Frederick's conceptions of themselves, then moving on to an analysis of press attempts to reconcile these images of the couple with dominant discourse, as well as the ways in which narratives constructed by the legal system matched with or overwrote the same images, we begin to understand why representations of the Mannings did not always adhere to conventional Victorian ideologies of femininity, masculinity, and criminology.

The two sections in this chapter follow the same pattern, the first with a focus on Maria and the second on Frederick. Each section will begin by relating and analysing the gendered representations that each constructed of themselves, verbally and through their embodied presence. I will then move to an analysis of how the press contended with these self-presentation. Finally, both sections will close with an analysis of the representations created by the legal system, and how closely or not these portrayals matched with what the Mannings said about themselves. A conclusion to the chapter will focus on what we have learned about Victorian understandings of

womanhood, manhood, and criminality by exploring the gaps that exist between discourse and lived experience.

Maria

From the moment Maria was apprehended by the police in Scotland, she insisted upon her innocence. She was, after all, the one who removed O'Connor's railway shares from the valuables box in his bedroom, and she had fled from the city, taking the only valuables belonging to her and her husband along with her. When questioned about this behaviour, Maria told the inspectors that she had left London to escape her husband's abuse, fearing for her life. She said Frederick had threatened to cut off her head multiple times and once chased her with a knife. As for the railway shares bearing O'Connor's name, Maria claimed that O'Connor had bought the shares for her, using her own money. They had been kept in O'Connor's name because Maria, like all women in the 1840s, assumed the legal status of *feme covert* upon her marriage. This meant that her economic and legal identity was subsumed under her husband's, and she was legally unable to enter economic contracts, such as would be required to purchase railway scrip, in her own name. Even if she had been able to purchase them in her own name, because her identity was one and the same with her husband, the shares would legally have belonged to him. Maria told the inspectors that she had asked O'Connor to buy the shares for her so she could sell them abroad without her husband's knowledge.

Neighbours confirmed reports of violence between the couple.[19] Maria's representation of herself and her behaviour in this instance fits with patterns of women navigating nineteenth-century

[19] *The Times*, 23 August 1849, p.5b; *The Times*, 28 August 1849, p.4e.

domestic violence cases identified by Elizabeth Foyster.[20] For most working-class couples, divorce was not possible, and although marital separation was a possibility, the wife was strongly disadvantaged in these scenarios, forfeiting all property, income from real estate, and future earnings to her husband. Many women instead sought solutions to marital disharmony through friends and family.[21] Maria had no family in England, and she spoke of O'Connor as her only friend in the world. In expected fashion for cases of marital violence, Maria had left Frederick more than once before the murder, staying with O'Connor, her only friend, on both of those occasions.[22] Even the removal of property from the house she shared with her husband fit this pattern; women leaving abusive spouses took linens and other goods necessary to maintain a household.[23] Maria's articulation of herself as a victim of marital violence was a gendered representation; she expressed fear and fragility, emotions that were coded feminine in the Victorian era. She constructed herself as a woman in need of protection and dependent on men for that protection. This was a display of appropriate femininity.

Maria continued to invoke this image of herself as an innocent woman in need of protection throughout the trial. The most striking example of this was at her conviction, when she was asked by the courts if she would like to say why she should not face the death penalty. Maria lambasted the court and all of England for the verdict: "There is no law for me. I have had no protection - neither from the judges, nor from the prosecutors, nor from my husband. I am unjustly condemned by this court." She explicitly stated that she was "a woman and alone," forced to fight the

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[20] Foyster, 14.
[21] Foyster, 16, 18.
[22] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p. 6f; *The Times*, 23 August 1849, p.5b.
[23] Foyster, 51.

prosecutors, the judge, and the statements of her husband.[24] Maria's own words in this case, although potentially mediated in their transmission to us by inspectors and the press, were one way in which she constructed a gendered representation of herself that appealed to dominant ideologies of appropriate femininity.

Maria's words were then combined with another mode of communicating and displaying an adherence to suitable womanhood - her dress and physical comportment. Maria's attention to dress and her body language in the courtroom were a central focus of this case and were used consciously by Maria in an attempt to perform acceptable femininity. Dress was a critical part of womanhood in the nineteenth century and was central to Maria's life. She was trained as a dressmaker and, since coming to England, had been a personal maid to women of the nobility, a position that required a high standard of dress. This standard would have been even higher for Maria in her position as *femme de chambre* to Lady Blantyre, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland, one of the wealthiest families of the nineteenth century. The Duchess of Sutherland was mistress of the robes to Queen Victoria, who visited Stafford House while Maria was employed there.[25] In this position Maria would have learned the intricacies of how to dress as a woman of the upper classes. Maria paid an exquisite amount of attention to her dress while in prison and in her courtroom appearances. *The Times* reports that, shortly after her capture, Maria displayed frustration at the limitations of her wardrobe; the following month they report that she

[24] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p. 6f.
[25] Zedner, 54; Borowitz, 19.

devoted time and energy to choosing and preparing attire for her next court appearance, as well as modifying her bonnet. Later still, she displayed anxiety over creases developing in her satin dress.[26]

To modern readers, this may come across as an incomprehensible level of vanity, but I argue instead that Maria was consciously using dress to signal her femininity and respectability. Clothes in the Victorian era were crucial to claims of respectability.[27] As a suspected working-class murderess, Maria used dress as a way of demonstrating her adherence to appropriate femininity. Middle-class professionals believed that physical dirt and immorality could not be separated in women, and the dominant discourses around female criminality held that criminal women stopped paying attention to dress and hygiene altogether. Zedner tells us that an unkempt appearance could actually create suspicion about a woman's character.[28] Thus, Maria's focus on dress was actually a way for her to construct a gendered representation of respectability and innocence, separating her from women who were considered criminal based on an appearance marked by dirty clothing. Her increasing anxiety over her appearance as the trial went on illustrates Maria's understanding of the importance of dress to claims of appropriate femininity and, by extension, innocence.

Maria also used physical comportment in the courtroom to construct her own image. From even her first court appearance, *The Times* was reporting on her resolution and determination, commenting that "her countenance did not betoken the slightest symptom of agitation or alarm." *The Morning Chronicle* writes that her appearances in court were characterized by a "remarkable coolness and self-possession." [29] She declined to sit when a chair was provided for her, standing at

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[26] *The Times*, 27 August 1849, p.5d; *The Times*, 4 September 1849, p.7a; *The Times*, 17 September 1849, p.8a.
[27] Steinbach, 14; Zedner, 16-17.
[28] Zedner, 28, 54.
[29] *The Times*, 24 August 1849, p.5e; *The Morning Chronicle*, 26 October 1849, p.5b.

the bar "almost as motionless as a statue," day in and day out.[30] We know that she paid conscious attention to her body language, once commenting to a guard: "I showed them resolution, did I not?"[31] Clearly, Maria used both dress and body language to construct her own image of feminine respectability, and to a certain extent she succeeded. *The Times* described her thus: "Her manner in the dock was suitable to her position in life, being submissive and respectful, without any trace of alarm about herself" with "manners and appearance [...] much what might be expected in a domestic in one of the town estates of our nobility."[32]

Maria used her words and her physical embodiment to demonstrate her adherence to dominant discourses around class-specific appropriate femininity, and her gendered representation of herself made an intervention into those circulating in the press. Press portrayals of Maria were based on the intersections of middle-class discourses on femininity, the working-class, and criminology. The press, forced to contend with Maria's self-conscious assertion of her femininity and respectability, actually used Maria's representation of herself in their attempt to re-write her into these ideologies, though (as we will see) they were not entirely successful. The press never accepted Maria's representation of herself as a victim of marital violence, or her claims to respectable femininity. Women were expected to be economically dependent on their husbands, and Maria continually insisted that she had money of her own and that her husband had been trying to gain access to it.[33] She was also at a class disadvantage. Foyster tells us that there was a difference in the level of violence that a gentlewoman and a working-class woman could be

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[30] *The Times,* 7 September 1849, p.4e; *The Times,* 26 October 1849, p.4e.
[31] Qtd. in Knelman, 102.
[32] *The Times,* 25 August 1849, p.5c.
[33] Foyster, 10, 77; *The Times,* 27 October 1849, p. 6f.

expected to endure, while Carolyn Conley reminds us that sympathetic responses to domestic violence were contingent on the ability of a woman to appear fragile or unable to protect herself and thus were "often reserved for middle-class women." Conley's study of criminal justice in Victorian Kent also tells us that some male writers in the nineteenth century believed working-class women to not be fully women at all.[34] We can see how Maria's self-conscious construction of herself as strong and resolute clashed with dominant ideologies of feminine responses to marital violence.

One of the major nineteenth-century discourses used by the press to construct a gendered representation of Maria was that of female criminology. Here again Maria was disadvantaged by class and by her embodied presence. While Maria may have understood her attention to dress and appearance as a way to demonstrate respectable femininity, prevailing criminological discourses relating to the dress of the working-class were mobilized by the press to criticize her as vain - a characteristic routinely attributed to criminal women. Vanity among working-class women was believed to be a cause of prostitution and was an integral part of the image of the fallen woman.[35] Middle-class anxiety around Maria's dress and perceived vanity might have been higher than it was for other women. As Mariana Valverde explains, this ideological link between vanity and prostitution "is especially visible in discussions about the dress of female servants," whose desire to dress well was considered perverse. Servants, especially *femmes de chambre* like Maria, knew

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[34] Foyster, 10, 77. Carolyn A. Conley, *The Unwritten Law: Criminal Justice in Victorian Kent* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1991), 71.
[35] Zedner, 82; Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-century Social Discourse," *Victorian Studies* 32, no.2 (1989): 169.

how to dress like upper-class women and often received the cast-off clothing of their mistresses, thus enabling them to destabilize the visual hierarchy between the classes.[36]

The press also harnessed the stereotype of the fallen woman to depict Maria as criminal, beginning with suggestions that her relationship with O'Connor had been an adulterous one. Victorian discourse understood sexual immorality in women to be the first step in a downward progress to criminal activity. Maria's resolute determination, especially when coupled with her husband's apparent weakness and frailty, also marked her out as a particular type of fallen woman, a sort of criminal siren who "entranced weak-willed men [...] and so inveigled them unthinkingly into any immorality she might choose to instigate."[37] This is a violation of accepted feminine behaviour, but also of the emerging idea in this period that innate in women's nature was an ability to pacify men and to prevent them from resorting to violence. There was a new responsibility placed on wives to reform the behaviour of their husbands, not drag them into disrepute.[38]

Another middle-class discourse about female criminals was that of the 'masculine' and unattractive woman.[39] From the moment Maria enters the courtroom, and thus the public eye, *The Times* takes great care to emphasize that she is by no means beautiful or handsome, and routinely describes her body as masculine or unnatural. The press tries to characterize her this way, but it is never entirely successful. No matter what is printed in the papers, Maria is both attractive and feminine, and she self-consciously styles herself as such. *The Times* is forced to acknowledge this, but attempts to write off her attractiveness by describing her as "decidedly passé" and her features

[36] Valverde, 182.
[37] Zedner, 33, 49.
[38] Ibid., 87.
[39] Seal, 24.

as “neither regular nor feminine,” though they are forced to admit that “she has evidently been a comely woman.”[40] We can see the gap between this discourse of the masculine and unattractive criminal woman and the lived experience in reports of the trial and inquest - witnesses continue to refer to Maria as attractive.

We have now seen how Maria represented herself in a gendered way during this case, and how the press tried to contend with this representation while constructing their own from dominant middle-class discourses about femininity and criminality. Representations of Maria were also constructed within the confines of the legal system. I will analyse the gendered representations of Maria by her lawyer and by Frederick’s lawyer with an eye to exploring the gap between the way Maria represented herself and the way these legal discourses represented her. Frederick’s lawyer, Charles Wilkins, made explicit reference to dominant discourses of female criminality as more unnatural and heinous than male criminality, arguing that, while women are capable of reaching a higher state of morality than men, “when once she gives way to vice she sinks far lower.” He goes on to characterize Maria as the mastermind behind the murder, “[making] her husband her dupe and instrument for that purpose.”[41] Wilkins is attempting to save the life of Frederick by casting all blame on Maria, and we can see that he is marshalling dominant discourses of female criminality to construct a representation of Maria as the sole guilty party. This is important because it allows us insight into how and why these discourses were formed and deployed.

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[40] *The Times*, 24 August 1849, p.5e; *The Times*, 25 August 1849, p.5c; *The Times*, 17 September 1849, p.8a. In the same sentence Maria’s figure is described as masculine, handsome, and unusually strong, though earlier reports strongly refuted descriptions of her as handsome.
[41] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p.5f.

William Ballantine, Maria's lawyer, also used dominant discourses of femininity, but this time to prove Maria's innocence. He begins by asking the jury to find that Maria "did not forget her sex" by committing a violent murder. Ballantine took the evidence presented by the prosecution as signalling Maria's guilt in the murder and attempted to rewrite her actions as merely an adherence to appropriate femininity. He tried to eliminate the motive of robbery by arguing that Maria, as a young, attractive woman in an adulterous relationship with an older man, could have easily manipulated O'Connor into giving her any money she requested. The prosecution argued that Maria's act of paying for the crowbar used to beat O'Connor to death is proof that she was an accessory before the act, but Ballantine asked the jury "what was a more usual occurrence than for such a payment to be made by the wife in any family in ordinary life?" We can start to see two conflicting discourses of womanhood invoked by Ballantine. He admitted to Maria's alleged adultery, which put her outside the bounds of appropriate femininity by constructing her as both independent of her husband and sexually passionate, but then immediately tried to represent her as an ideal wife who paid for her husband's purchases without question.

Ballantine's next strategy was to appeal to dominant discourses about the nature of women, arguing that "even the worst prostitute" or "the basest woman" would never have been able to aid O'Connor when he fell ill at the Manning home the night before his death if she had "murderous intent in her heart." Ballantine argued that, at the moment Maria rendered aid to O'Connor, she had shown an interest in his welfare of the kind that "most affected a woman, and which would lead her to repudiate the notion of murder." He then refocused on Maria's alleged adultery with O'Connor and argued that she could not be an accessory after the fact because it was natural for her, as a woman who knew she "had acted sinfully and criminally towards her husband," to hide a

crime motivated by the jealousy her own illegal actions inspired.[42] Ballantine, then, constructed Maria as both a dutiful wife and a sinful adulterer, ashamed and afraid that her own actions had been the cause of her reported lover's death.

The two gendered representations of Maria presented by Wilkins and Ballantine are competing ones, the first relying on dominant discourses of female criminality and the fallen woman, the second on discourses of natural feminine traits and instincts. The courtroom of a murder trial thus becomes a site of contestation, opening up a window through which we can view how these discourses were created and mobilized in the nineteenth century. They also offer us a view into whether the ways in which defendants in criminal proceedings in the nineteenth century represented themselves were taken up or written over by the legal system and its reliance on dominant discourse.

FREDERICK

One of the first statements Frederick made to the inspectors who captured him on Jersey was to ask "Is the wretch taken?" Upon being assured that Maria was in custody, Frederick exclaimed, "Thank God, I am glad of it; that will save my life. She is the guilty party; I am as innocent as a lamb."[43] From the beginning, Frederick placed full responsibility for the murder on Maria. When asked by inspectors if he had not noticed the incredibly large hole that had been dug in his back kitchen, he said that he had but that he believed it was meant to be his grave, telling inspectors, "I believe my wife intended to murder me." Frederick was constructing a representation of himself as a victim of marital violence, much like Maria had done.

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[42] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p.6c and p.6d.
[43] *The Times*, 1 September 1849, p.5c.

In order to make this claim work, Frederick had to adopt the behaviours expected of victims of marital violence, and he did just that - he displayed his fragility by telling inspectors that he had fainted when Maria shot O'Connor.[44] Frederick finally admitted to being responsible for beating O'Connor with the crowbar, but he maintained his representation of himself as weak, fragile, and afraid of his wife. He claimed that Maria shot O'Connor, then pointed a second pistol at him, "threatening to serve him the same" if he did not help her.[45] Frederick's verbal representation of himself was gendered, but not in the way we might expect. He attempted to distance himself from dominant discourses of violent masculinity by portraying himself as weak, fragile, and subordinate to a spouse. Frederick's comportment in court certainly conformed to his verbal representation of himself. Pleading illness, his lawyer had to continually ask permission for Frederick to remain seated throughout the proceedings, rather than stand as was expected and as Maria did throughout the trial. While seated, he continued to project the image of a cowed man, sitting "with his body bent forward, and his head down." On a rare day that he was standing, he did not seem able to support himself, leaning against the back of the dock, "his head resting on one hand, while with the other he supported himself behind."[46]

Frederick's gendered representation of himself as a weak-willed man, created through both words and his embodiment in court, was taken up by the press. They were all too happy to cast Frederick as unmanly and therefore outside the bounds of accepted and respectable masculinity. A critical component of Victorian hegemonic masculinity was an emphasis on self-control, a

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[44] Ibid., p.5d.
[45] *The Times*, 2 November 1849, p.7c.
[46] *The Times*, 8 September 1849, p.5a; *The Times*, 17 September 1849, p.8a; *The Times*, 20 September 1849, p.5e; *The Times*, 28 September 1849, p.6e.

characteristic thought to set men above women and children, who naturally lacked it. The man who, like Frederick, committed murder, especially for financial gain, could not be a true man, as he obviously acted without self-control. *The Times* was explicit when it came to casting Frederick outside accepted masculinity - they described him as effeminate.[47] Effeminacy was a pejorative description for men who did not conform to dominant discourses of masculinity. In the 1840s it was associated with incompetence and tied directly to a lack of self-control.[48] Frederick's effeminacy and lack of control was threefold: he was suspected of committing murder for financial gain; he represented himself as a man too weak to resist a domineering wife; and he was a drunk. Drunkenness in the 1840s had overtones of immorality and was thought to be associated with cruelty and violence.[49] *The Times* focused heavily on Frederick's alcohol consumption, reporting that a doctor had to visit him twice to recommend that he be allowed to continue taking brandy and that his restlessness in prison could have been due "to the effects of dissipation while in Jersey." With great satisfaction and moralizing overtones, *The Times* reported that Frederick had been captured because of his own vice; he aroused suspicion in Jersey by the amount of brandy he sent for while lodging with a known teetotaller.[50]

The press was all too happy to strengthen Frederick's defense of himself as a weak-willed man with limited self-control because it made Maria appear remarkably strong and masculine in

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[47] *The Times*, 1 September 1849, p.5d.
[48] Steinbach, 6, 223; Thaïs E. Morgan, "Victorian Effeminacies," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 111-112.
[49] Brian Howard Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872*. 2nd ed. (Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 1994), 23, 26; Shani D'Cruze, "Introduction," *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender and Class* ed. Shani D'Cruze (London: Longman, 2000), 12.
[50] *The Times*, 31 August 1849, p.5d; *The Times*, 1 September 1849, p.5d; *The Times*, 3 September 1849, p.5f; *The Times*, 5 September 1849, p.8b.

contrast. But how did the legal system represent him? His own lawyer, Wilkins, ignored the drinking which the press used to construct Frederick as weak and instead focused on Frederick's insistence on being controlled by a domineering wife. Wilkins argues that Frederick could not have killed O'Connor because of his lack of masculinity. He tells the jury that the prosecution's motive of jealousy did not fit Frederick's behaviour, saying he "was only too easy about his honour as a husband" because he knew of his wife's affair with O'Connor but still "received him upon every occasion with the greatest cordiality and friendship."[51] Maria's lawyer also spoke of Frederick's weak character, calling him a "poltroon" and "a feeble mind yielding to the influence of cowardice and fear" to blame his wife for the murder. If he was a true man, Ballantine charged, Frederick "ought to have cherished and protected [his wife]." Ballantine told the jury that he could hardly conceive of "how any man in the position of a husband" could throw such blame on his wife, whom he had a duty to protect.[52] Both lawyers used Frederick's representation of himself as a weak man, but in different ways and to different ends. Wilkins, arguing for Frederick's innocence, used his weak character to attempt to dismiss the prosecution's motive. Wilkins constructed Frederick as so far outside the bounds of respectable masculinity that he allowed his wife and O'Connor to continue in an affair, ceding his patriarchal authority to his wife and continuing to welcome O'Connor into his home. Ballantine also used dominant discourses of masculinity to cast Frederick outside the bounds of respectable behaviour, but he based his representation of Frederick's weak character on his cowardice and seeming willingness to sacrifice his wife in order to save himself.

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[51] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p.6f.
[52] *The Times*, 27 October 1849, p.6c, p.6d.

The period under analysis in this chapter is that in which the Mannings had a direct impact on, and made interventions into, the gendered representations that both the press and legal system constructed of them. Each constructed a gendered representation of themselves using words and comportment while in the courtroom, and each relied on dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, and criminology to do it. The press and the legal system also relied on these dominant discourses to represent the Mannings, but they used them in profoundly different ways. These tensions between self-presentation, press representation, and legal representation open up gaps between ideology and lived experience that we can use as a window into how these dominant discourses came to be constructed and deployed in the early Victorian period, and demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the way individuals constructed their own identities.

CHAPTER III: Exit the Mannings; or, Life After Death.

13 November 1849 - 1901.

With their deaths, the Mannings were no longer able to intervene in the ways in which they were represented, and the press and popular literature could discursively do as they pleased to them. While the press could theoretically construct the Mannings however it liked, the representations that Maria and Frederick created for themselves had a lasting effect. What they said and the way they held themselves could not be entirely written over, even after their deaths. The middle-class papers, like *The Times*, adopted a moralizing tone in the immediate days after the execution on 13 November, using dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, and criminology to construct the couple as reprehensible, irredeemable criminals.

There remained, however, a gap between these moralizing, dominant accounts and the way individuals spoke and wrote about the Mannings. Maria could still not be written off as a typically unattractive criminal woman, and Frederick's insistence on his weakness remained a dominant thread. The post-mortem representations of the Mannings also touched on an underexplored theme in the historiography of capital punishment - the eroticization of the publicly displayed dead female body. This chapter will again be divided into sections. We will begin, this time, with representations of Frederick, as representations of the couple and the case during the remaining years of the Victorian period are notable for his absence. We will then examine how Maria was represented after her death, including a discussion of the eroticized representations of her postmortem body.

FREDERICK

Frederick's story of having acted under the orders of his wife was maintained in press and literary accounts after his death, though none attempted to argue that this meant he was innocent of murder. Frederick was still described as a weak and cowardly, indeed, an effeminate man. *The Times* referred to him as "the weaker vessel" of the couple: as "the thing who was [Maria's] husband, but not a man." *The Times* ends their discussion of Frederick here, declaring "one hardly ventures to speak of him, lest we should make him out too base even for punishment."[53] Other press accounts, however, continued to discuss him. The *Morning Chronicle* report on the execution of the Mannings lambasts Frederick for refusing to warn O'Connor that Maria planned to murder him, while still acknowledging that he was "a slave to her reckless, violent, and domineering temper."[54] Other journalistic accounts said much the same. A discussion of criminal offenders referred to him as "a weak and commonplace profligate," while the deputy-governor of Newgate called him "a very imbecile character" in an interview with Henry Mayhew and John Binny.[55] Fictionalized accounts of the case were no different. An 1858 detective story describes him as a "rakish-looking" drunk "with a weak expression." As late as 1893, an overview of the case in *The Boy's Comic Journal* writes that Frederick was "a clumsy-looking man of rather effeminate appearance," "a craven" and a "cowardly husband." The account goes on to have a fictionalized

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[53] *The Times*, 14 November 1849, p.4b.
[54] *The Morning Chronicle*, 14 November 1849, p.4a.
[55] William Johnston, "Criminal Offenders," in *England as it is, Political, Social, and Industrial, in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century,* vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1851), 105; Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London: And Scenes of Prison Life,* vol. 3 (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1862), 608.

Maria call her husband “a poltroon - a cur!” an offense for which he is about to beat her when O’Connor arrives on their doorstep.[56]

MARIA

Unlike Frederick, postmortem representations of Maria were prolific. While all of them upheld her guilt in the crime, none managed to wrest her into the dominant image of female criminals as masculine and unattractive, although some certainly tried. The *Morning Chronicle* spoke of the “more than masculine violence of her character,” her “hyena-like nature,” and likened her to Clytemnestra, “with all the masculine fierceness of her prototype.” A phrenological report printed in 1852 assigned her what were typically thought to be ‘masculine’ characteristics and downplayed conventionally ‘feminine’ ones - her skull reportedly showed enlarged organs of ‘Acquisitiveness,’ ‘Destructiveness,’ and ‘Combativeness,’ but lacked ‘Friendship,’ ‘Love of Offspring,’ ‘Benevolence’ and ‘Veneration.’ *The Times* also took a moralizing tone that condemned Maria for her role in the murder, but in contrast to the *Morning Chronicle* and their own earlier insistences, described her as handsome.[57]

Maria’s representation of herself as attractive and distinctly feminine seems to have carried on. Indeed, during and after her death, representations of her shift from merely ‘handsome’ to outrightly sensual and erotic. She was likened in one instance to Jezebel and in several others to Lady Macbeth. One anonymous person found this latter comparison to be offensive to Lady

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[56] John Ross Dix, “The Black Satin Gown; or, Murder Will Out,” *Ballou’s Dollar Monthly Magazine,* 1 May 1858; “Tales of Tragic Trials: A Pair of Monsters,” *The Boy’s Comic Journal*, 1893, p.238a, 238b, 238c.

[57] *Morning Chronicle*, 14 November 1849, p.4b; “The Heads of the Mannings, the Murderers,” in *Reynold’s Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art* vol. VIII, p.61b; *The Times*, 14 November 1849, p.5a; Zedner, 23.

Macbeth, writing, in a letter to the editor of *The Era,* that "Lady Macbeth was a high, and haughty, and aspiring lady; Mrs. Manning was a low, and grovelling, and abject strumpet." The fictional detective story *The Black Satin Gown; or, Murder Will Out* has O'Connor's landlord call Maria "that nasty trollop." She was a villain, but a highly feminine and sexualized one. *Punch,* in a piece criticizing Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors, wrote about the "large, ripe lip" of Maria's wax figure, and members of the police force sold locks of Maria's "long and beautiful tresses" after it was cut off to take a cast of her head.[58] That there was a market for her hair is significant because hair in the Victorian period was highly sexualized. Hairstyles for men were becoming shorter over the nineteenth century, and a woman's (long) hair was often one of the only uncovered and distinctly feminine parts of the body.[59]

Some of the portrayals of Maria as a sexual being were profoundly eroticized. V.A.C. Gatrell, in his work on execution, writes that "the bucking female body as it hanged could elicit obscene fantasies" which were beginning to be "cautiously admitted" in the early nineteenth century, and this seems to have been the case in the execution of Maria.[60] Charles Dickens, along with his biographer John Forster, attended the execution of the Mannings, with Dickens describing her hanged body as "a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side." Forster described his feelings as he witnessed her death: "this is heroine-worship, I think!" His description of Maria's

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[58] Dix, *The Black Satin Gown*; "The Mannings at Home," *Punch* 17, no. 438 (December 1849): 213; *The Preston Guardian*, 24 November 1849, p.2d.
[59] Galia Ofek, "Hair Theorized," in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 3.
[60] V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 264.

hanging corpse, in a letter to a friend, was even more eroticized than Dickens': "she was *beautifully dressed*, every part of her noble figure finely and fully expressed by close fitting black satin...there was nothing hideous in her as she swung to and fro afterward." He also commented on "her manicured hands." Underscoring the vehemence of Forster's impressions, he was still considering Maria in erotic terms when he wrote to the same friend a month later. In this letter Forster spoke admirably of Maria's "sensitive cleanliness of body" and noted that the doctor who examined her corpse "said he had never seen so beautiful a figure, [and] compared her feet to those of a marble statue."[61] Forster's fixation on Maria, especially on her hands and feet, is highly suggestive. Forster would not have been able to see Maria's hands underneath the gloves she wore, but a woman's hands and feet were sexually charged body parts in the Victorian era, precisely because they were usually covered by gloves and shoes.[62] While Maria's alleged adultery was hinted at strongly in representations of her while she was alive, it was not until the instant of her death that these representations became highly and explicitly sexualized. This is further evidence that attempts to characterize Maria as the mannish and unattractive female offender that contemporary criminological discourses spoke of never entirely succeeded. Maria's feminine comportment and embodiment prevented it.

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[61] Charles Dickens, "Lying Awake," *Household Words* vol. 6, no. 136 (30 October 1852): 146; James A. Davies, "Literature's Friend," in *John Forster, a Literary Life* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), 79, 80. Emphasis original.
[62] Kay, 42.

Conclusions

The press and the legal system drew on early Victorian gender prescriptions and criminological discourses in an effort to explain and understand Frederick and Maria Manning, a pair of unlikely husband-and-wife killers. More significantly, the Mannings marshalled these same discourses in creating gendered representations of themselves which functioned both to uphold and to resist the narratives being deployed by journalists and lawyers. This speaks to the importance of paying attention to the way individuals constructed their own identities - taking seriously Frederick and Maria's representations of themselves makes obvious the gap between prescription and lived experience. That these self representations were able to impact the narratives constructed by the press and the legal system, even long after their deaths, explains the complexity and variety of representations of the Mannings, particularly Maria, constructed throughout the Victorian era.

But why have the Mannings remained present in our imaginations? Looking at two other executions involving female-male co-defendants in 1849 might provide us with an answer.

In March 1849, Jane and Michael Scally, a married couple, were executed for the 1848 murder of Isabella Brennan in Roscommon. Michael was seen dragging Isabella from the home the Scallys shared with her, by a rope around her neck. He put her body in a basket and Jane loaded the basket onto her husband's back. The two then rowed across the Shannon and abandoned Isabella's body on the other side. Michael was convicted and executed for first degree murder, and Jane "as principal in the first degree." Both acknowledged their guilt before they were executed.[63] The second pair, Catherine Dillon and John Fogarty were executed in Limerick in July for the

[63] *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 2 March 1849; *The Standard*, 3 March 1849, p.3f; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 23 March, 1849.

murder of Catherine's husband, Daniel. As in the Manning case, the murder was believed to be financially motivated, and the press report of the trial insinuated that Catherine and John had been lovers. John and a number of his friends had beaten Daniel to death at Catherine's urging, though it was acknowledged that John owed Daniel approximately forty-two pounds. Catherine and John admitted their guilt and were the only two executed for the crime, he for murder in the first degree, and she as an accessory before the fact.[64]

None of the digitized press reports provided a behavioural or physical description of the Scallys or John Fogarty. Catherine Dillon, however, was described in this way. One report of the trial told readers that the Dillon and Fogarty case was unusual partially due to Catherine herself, characterized by the press as a "woman of means" who had become involved in murder through her adulterous relationship with Fogarty, whom the press described as "merely a common labourer."[65] Attention was paid to the way Catherine was dressed, though reports of her clothing were not as detailed as those of Maria. More significantly, her comportment in the courtroom received sustained attention. Unlike Maria, who betrayed no emotion and stood as resolute as a statue throughout her trial, Catherine Dillon wept. According to the press, Catherine "held a white handkerchief, constantly applying it to her eyes, and seemed to be deeply affected at her wretched position." She became so overwhelmed that she sank to her knees in the dock and had to be provided with a chair.[66] These were all signs of appropriate femininity that helped ensure that Catherine Dillon, unlike Maria Manning, would be convicted as an accessory before the fact and her story forgotten. Press reports of the case did not contain her own words, and her behaviour

[64] *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 21 July, 1849.
[65] *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 23 July, 1849.
[66] Ibid.

conformed to Victorian ideologies of femininity which affirmed the gendered representations of her created by the press. Thus the case of Catherine Dillon lacked what made the case of Maria Manning a sensation - performances that challenged and resisted those constructed by the press and the legal system.

These two cases provide further evidence that the Mannings continue to capture the imagination and attention of the British public because of their unexpected gender presentations, especially the ways in which they represented themselves. While Catherine and Jane acted outside the bounds of their gender by involving themselves in murder, each acted as a (feminine) non-violent accessory to male partners who used (masculine) violence to kill. The Scallys, Catherine Dillon, and John Fogarty adhered to Victorian ideals of gendered behaviour and they have been all but forgotten, while the Mannings, who were able to intervene into the ways in which the press and the legal system represented them, continue to live on in the popular imagination.

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5d, 28 August 1849, 4e, 31 August 1849, 5d, 1 September 1849, page 5c-5d, 3 September 1849, 5f, 4 September 1849, 7a, 5 September 1849, 8b, 7 September 1849, 4e, 8 September 1849, 5a, 17 September 1849, 8a, 20 September 1849, 5e, 28 September 1849, 6e, 26 October 1849, 4e, 27 October 1849, 6c-6d, 6f, 2 November, 1849 7c, 14 November, 1849 4b-5a.

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