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## The Archetypical Poisoning Woman: Sarah Chesham © Victoria Nagy

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**Ponds cottages at Deers Green, Clavering c.1900. Illustration © Clavering Local History Collection.**

Sarah Chesham was a working-class, illiterate woman who lived at Ponds cottages in Clavering. She was charged with murder (poisoning with arsenic) and tried on four occasions, three times in 1847 with regard to poisoning of children, and once in 1851 for the poisoning of her husband.

The media was intensely interested in her and her crimes; the London newspapers regularly updated their readers on the progress of her trials in Chelmsford. A broadside ballad was circulated. While Chesham had been accused of poisoning children she was not considered such a grave threat to Victorian moral and gender order as when her husband died, seemingly also at her hands. Chesham's first case, although followed closely by the

newspapers, was not much different from numerous other cases every year of mothers killing their children. The interest in her trial in 1851 for the death of her husband was not only from the newspapers, but the wider public and the government also (for example in Parliamentary debates and letters to the editor of *The Times*). The day before Chesham's execution the *Sale of Arsenic Act* was passed, along with the section stating women were not allowed to buy arsenic, only men were permitted to do so. Editorial remarks, as well as the focus of the prosecution's narrative on

Chesham as a 'bad' woman indicated an interest more in female criminals and criminality than Chesham. As a consequence of this interesting shift in media, government and legal attention, this article will argue that this fascination with her character and her crimes was less to do with Chesham herself, but rather that Chesham became a focal point through which to explore female criminality; that is to say her womanhood seemed incomprehensible and required explanation.

### **Poisoning and poisons**

Poisonings (both accidental and criminal) were very frequent in the decade between 1839 and 1849. In 1850, a returns paper was presented to the House of Commons on the poisonings throughout the United Kingdom. In total 240 individuals were tried. The number of women, children and men who were poisoned on a yearly basis was estimated to be much higher. Numerous poisons were widely available to people from all backgrounds; arsenic, aconite, Prussic acid, cyanide, strychnine and Emetic tartar were all available without any prohibitions on sales.

Up until the 1830s the detection of arsenic had virtually been impossible. The wide availability of arsenic and its capacity to cause either a very swift death or prolonged illness that mimicked the symptoms of cholera (and thus was deemed to be a death by natural rather than suspicious causes) resulted in it frequently being used (perhaps most famously by the Borgia family in Italy). Most people who died from arsenic poisoning died because of mistakes, accidents or continued exposure, not murder. This did not prevent growing social unease about arsenical poisonings in the 19th century as the English authorities were becoming increasingly concerned about the rise in the number of poisoning murders committed with arsenic. Arsenic was found everywhere in Victorian Britain, and not always accidentally or for malicious purposes; a great deal of it was introduced purposely into many of the components of everyday life, with the result that people took it in with fruits and vegetables, swallowed it with wine, inhaled it from cigarettes, absorbed it from cosmetics, and imbibed it even from the pint glass.

In the years from 1839 to 1846 (the year when Sarah Chesham allegedly committed her first poisoning crime), *The Times* published a total of 132 articles related to poisoning crimes within the United Kingdom. Of these articles, 73 are concerned with the cases of women on trial for poisoning crimes, while 59 articles refer to men who used poison to kill. While the need for legislation to be passed in order to restrict the sale of poisons such as arsenic had been debated at various times throughout the century, it was Chesham's case in 1850 that prompted the introduction of *The Sale of Arsenic Act 1851*. In 1850 the government drafted a bill (the Sale of Arsenic Bill) to regulate the sale of arsenic - shortly before Sarah Chesham was again arrested and charged with the murder of her husband, Richard. The Sale of Arsenic Bill was introduced to counter the mounting criticism of the government for their lack of action. The legislation wasn't passed to protect the innocent *en masse* from poisonings, but to protect men from the supposed large number of women who were bent on using arsenic to kill them.

### **Essex poisonings**

No woman had been hanged in Essex for 40 years, and there had not been an uncommonly large number of women being hanged in the previous years for poisoning. In fact in 1846, only one woman had been executed, Martha Browning, at Newgate, for murder by strangulation. Sarah Freeman was executed in 1845 for the murder of her brother with arsenic and was also implicated in the deaths of the rest of her family members. The case had caused a great deal of interest in the papers but no government response. Earlier still in 1844 Eliza Joyce had poisoned her three children after her husband refused to live with her, and although receiving publicity in *The Times*, interest in the case died fairly quickly. In 1851 Chesham was executed for poisoning her husband. Her execution came almost three years after another female poisoner in Essex, Mary May, was hanged. Whereas Essex had been without executions for four decades, the poisoning trials resulted in two executions in close succession.

By the mid-19th century the ever-increasing influence of middle-class values had taken a firm hold on the idea of how women and men should behave. Middle-class ideals of femininity were applied to working-class women, and Chesham herself was held to this standard. It was considered the duty of the community up until around the mid-19th century to control the behaviour of men and women in personal relationships because any break-down in the family could have negative effects on the greater community. Throughout the 19th century the state took an increased interest in preserving the moral order of its citizens.

With the rise of the middle-classes and the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria, the roles for men and women began to be more clearly distinguished: men were to play a public role and be within a public sphere, whereas women were expected to remain within a private sphere and only work within their households. These spheres often overlapped for working-class women who could not afford to wholly remain at home but had to work to provide for their families. When a woman was accused of poisoning her children or husband, there was a fear that the traditional care-giving role was being subverted and could result in the breakdown of the greater community. When a woman killed an abusive, drunken husband with an axe, or shot a lover it was, on the one hand, considered a very masculine and monstrous way to kill, justifiable only in cases where a woman was protecting herself against a very violent attack. On the other hand, it was considered *less* monstrous than using poison.

When women performed acts of violence it was sensationalised as an aberration from 'normal' gendered behaviour. An example of this during the mid-19th century is the crime of infanticide which was considered to contravene the maternal feelings that women were supposed to have. As this article illustrates, the trials of Sarah Chesham became ongoing sites for debate about female criminality and femininity.

The Chesham case is valuable as a site of feminist historical and criminological investigation and is more than a simple examination of newspaper depictions of her femininity. The investigation of this case also demonstrates the importance of a close-reading of broad source material in order to locate instances where reading narratives of the individual on trial can lead to uncovering the key concerns in the broader society.

### **Chesham's First Case**

At Chesham's first trial, the focus of both the defence and prosecution narrative was on Chesham's mothering abilities, and through that her womanhood. The defence, led by Mr George Bowker, presented an image of Chesham as a kind, caring, good mother who was incapable of killing her own sons let alone the son of another woman. In contrast, the prosecution sought to position Chesham as a bad woman who had been unfaithful to her husband and therefore was the kind of woman who would kill another woman's child for money. The inference was that by being a bad woman, Chesham was a bad mother. The two, mother and womanhood, were linked and failure in one indicated a failure in both.

The facts of the case were that in January 1845 James and Joseph Chesham both became violently ill at their home, Ponds. Joseph, the elder of the two boys, had recently been discharged from the service of Mr

Thomas Newport, a well-to-do farmer in Clavering who lived with his mother at Danceys Farm in the village centre.

The Cheshams on the other hand were a poor family consisting of farm labourers who mostly worked for the Newports. No suspicion was aroused, the doctor, Mr Stephen Hawkes, determining cholera as the cause of death. In January 1846, Sarah Chesham visited the home of Lydia Taylor, a young woman formerly in the employ of the Newport family, for the first time. She (Taylor) had had an affair with Thomas Newport and, upon discovery of her pregnancy, was discharged from service and returned to live with her mother in the nearby village of Manuden. Chesham, who was not previously acquainted with the Taylor family, went to visit on three occasions. According to Lydia Taylor and her mother, the baby, Solomon (who was born healthy and had no issues with his health before) took ill after each visit from Chesham, finally dying in September 1846. In August 1846, Thomas Newport was taken before the magistrates to pay child support. Following Solomon's death, Lydia Taylor reported to the magistrate that she felt Sarah Chesham had somehow murdered her son.

It was at this hearing that the magistrate first heard about the deaths of Joseph and James in the previous year. Chesham was apprehended and an inquest into the deaths commenced on the basis that she had previously visited the Taylor home, that she supposedly fed Solomon food she had brought with her, and that her own children had died unexpectedly. The bodies of Joseph and James were exhumed and, once tested, large quantities of arsenic were found in their stomachs.

On 24 October 1846 the inquest jury returned the verdict of wilful murder against Chesham for the deaths of her children. But the jury decided that Solomon's death was due to an inflammation from his glands; although they could not decide if it had been poison that had caused the inflammation and thus his death. Chesham was jailed until the following Lent Assizes to be held six months later. During her time in jail, Chesham dictated a letter (as she was unable to write), hoping to have it sent to Thomas Newport; instead it was given to the governor of the jail. The letter was used at her trial as evidence against her. In the letter Chesham claimed that she had been paid by Newport to poison Solomon and that she had done his bidding only to find that he had assaulted her son and possibly killed him. Newport was arrested and put on trial with Chesham for instigating the murder of Solomon Taylor. In May 1847 the trial of Chesham went ahead. The deaths of her two sons were treated as individual cases and she was first tried for the murder of James. The jury found her not guilty, and a new jury was empanelled because the judge was not happy with the acquittal of Chesham, but the second jury also acquitted her. Because Chesham had been acquitted for the deaths of Joseph and James, the jury was unwilling to find her guilty for the death

of Solomon, especially as his death could not be linked to Chesham. Both she and Newport were acquitted.

Cases of infanticide were not rare in England during the mid-century, and indeed women who killed their children were rarely if ever convicted of murder or sentenced to hang. Although the boys, Joseph and James, were well above the age determined by the crime of infanticide, Chesham's character was constructed by her legal defence as that of a caring and kind mother. Solomon Taylor's death could not be attributed to any poison or to Chesham; thus, no greater threat could be perceived to the community. That children were the victims led newspapers and the court to question whether Chesham exhibited maternal tendencies - if she did she could be innocent, if she did not then that was proof of her guilt.

*The Times* wasted no time in labelling the case a 'horrible drama' about an 'alarming topic' that involved the 'atrocious practice' of murder with arsenic. At this point in time the trial of Chesham hadn't even begun, yet *The Times* had already painted her as the 'reputed poisoner' who committed 'deeds which the imagination connects with the Medicis or the Gonzagas'. The newspapers assumed her guilt from the outset. *The Times* stated that 'it is beyond a question that an accepted and reputed murderess walked abroad in a village unchallenged and unaccused'. In order to illustrate the threat that Chesham allegedly posed *The Times* offered that 'she makes her appearance at the abode of her victim, and her errand is at once understood. The people try to keep the child out of her way, and watch her as they would a wasp or a snake'. Chesham is not only likened to animals but to ones which release venom and are deadly. The imagery is not subtle, and no other newspaper, that I have investigated, published such damning views of her character during her first case. Even the *Chelmsford Chronicle* was willing to publish the statements of the witnesses attesting to Chesham being a caring mother. By the mid-19th century *The Times* was one of the most widely circulated papers, and thus played a key role in determining how other newspapers would respond to similar stories. *The Times* editors could have considered it their duty to protect the public by notifying them of Chesham's freedom.

A few months previously, editors, reporters and the reading public were fascinated by news of serial poisonings in Norfolk that had been committed by an elderly man, Jonathan Balls, who had poisoned not only his family but random strangers. The close succession of two cases of poisoning in eastern England led to some newspapers referring to the crimes as a spate of secret poisonings. But the epidemic of poisonings that the newspapers constantly referred to were instead related to the changes in newspaper reporting, advances in criminal investigation and the development of testing for poisonous substances. There may have been more anxiety about poisoning crimes, but the rise of science's ability to

detect poisons was seen as the best weapon against poisoners. The professional nature of the scientific and medical professions could have been seen as the right weapon against poisoners, and kept the public less anxious through the belief that they would protect the innocent with the advances in the professions.

The rise in the number of newspapers during the mid-19th century in the United Kingdom meant that stories about crime reached a wider audience - there were not necessarily more poisonings, just more stories about them in circulation. It was mostly the newspapers that perpetuated the idea that secret poisonings had suddenly become endemic. Moreover, other than the historical association between poisoning and female deviance, poisonings also came to be associated with the rural, uneducated working class. *The Times* gladly labelled Clavering 'ignorant and secluded' and Essex as a whole 'uneducated'.

Throughout her first inquest and trial, newspaper representations focused on the prosecution's case, and the defence narrative of Chesham as loving mother and wife was largely absent. Although arsenic had been detected in the bodies of the boys it was not enough evidence for the prosecution to prove that Chesham had been the one to administer the poison. Rather than focusing on whether there had been any arsenic in her possession, the prosecution depicted Chesham as an uncaring mother. In the opening statement on Chesham's first indictment (of the poisoning of Joseph) the prosecuting counsel stated that 'it would be his duty to state certain expressions and certain acts on the part of the prisoner at the bar, which would lead to the impression that she had not that kind disposition that ought to exist in the heart of a mother towards her child'. Three men from Clavering were called to give their opinion of Chesham as a mother and a woman: the vicar Rev George Brookes, the farmer Thomas Newport and the surgeon, Stephen Hawkes. Chesham's behaviour following the death of her sons was taken as an indicator of her character, which would have had a bearing on the jury's verdict. The vicar in Clavering, George Brookes, remarked 'when I met Mrs. Chesham after their [Joseph and James'] deaths she seemed very angry for a long time with Thomas Newport and his mother'. Thomas Newport was also called upon to give evidence and he noted that upon telling her that he could no longer employ Joseph, after he had stolen two eggs, she 'appeared angry at first'. The surgeon Stephen Hawkes, who was attending to the children, stated that he had suggested to Chesham that an autopsy be performed on the boys but 'she made no reply... by her manner she did not seem agreeable to it'. Three of Clavering's leading men all had negative statements to make about Chesham. Accordingly the image of Chesham presented by the prosecution was of a disagreeable, angry and quarrelsome woman.

The prosecution relied on the evidence of a complete stranger, Lewis Player, a labourer for the Newport family, who based his impression of Chesham on the one occasion he saw her while he was riding past on the Newports' horse. Player stated that 'she was making a noise at her little boy that is at home now, I heard her say "you little dog hold your tongue, you ought to be where the others are".' He stated that he had told this to Lydia Taylor and her mother. According to the *Ipswich Journal*, when the coroner called both Lydia and her mother, both were in agreement that Chesham had sworn at her children and even hit one of them, although they would not swear to it under oath. The Coroner asked them 'do you mean to say that you have not told other persons that you heard her swear at the child and say "D--- me you want to be put to sleep like the other two?".'

While this conversation is not commented on in the legal documents, the inclusion of this in the newspapers further underlined the negative image circulating of Chesham as an uncaring mother who threatened to kill her own children. Stephen Hawkes added in his testimony that it was not Chesham who was taking care of the sick children but the grandmother: 'the grandmother was the principal person I saw at each of my visits and seen to take the most interest with the care'. Thomas Deards, the downstairs neighbour, stated that '[she] did not seem to be much put out' by the deaths of her sons and Lydia Newman, an acquaintance of Chesham, stated that 'I have said I thought perhaps she might do it but I had no evidence for saying so excepting as to what she had said to me about Mr Newport sending Joseph away'.

The prosecution had little to rely on in arguing its case. Chesham neither had arsenic, no one in her family had purchased any for her, and her husband and two living sons maintained there never was any arsenic in the house. The prosecution could only build its case on presenting Chesham's character as unfeminine, unmaternal. In contrast, the defence argued that Chesham was a kind and caring mother which resulted in a more sympathetic depiction of her character. Under cross-examination, four of the prosecution's witnesses attested to this. As Margaret Mynott stated, 'the prisoner... appeared to be a kind mother... and a decent woman in her way of life'. Thomas Deards also stated that following the boys' deaths, 'I saw Mrs. Chesham have a handkerchief before her eyes and she appeared to be crying a little while'. By displaying grief Chesham exhibited all the signs of a respectable wife and mother. Under cross-examination, the Vicar also swore that he 'had seen the manner in which Mrs. Chesham conducted herself toward her children and her conduct appeared to be what it ought to be'. Other than Player's statement about Chesham swearing at her children, there were no witnesses to show that she had ever mistreated them or not spoken lovingly to them. Mary Pudding, a fellow villager, also testified that 'she appeared to be a good

mother and is a pretty regular attendant at Church'. The defence seized upon these statements and insisted that 'she is spoken well of by one whose evidence you may place confidence, the minister of the parish... and you will hardly believe that the rev. gentleman would have spoken in the terms he did speak of her if she did not well deserve it', and that 'she has been an exemplary mother and attending properly to her religious duties'. This depiction of Chesham mobilised by the defence conformed to the gender norms that circulated in Victorian England: pious, loving of her children, sensitive and well-regarded by her community. No witness could clarify that they saw Chesham with arsenic, or that she had buried arsenic. The issue of the arsenic was not material to the evidence against Chesham when the character statements were positive about her femininity and mothering.

Even with limited evidence at their disposal from the coroner's inquest, the newspapers utilised other images of Chesham as guilty of the accused crimes. Articles in newspapers, for instance, reported that 'crimes of the blackest dye' were occurring in Clavering. The defence implored the jury 'not to let yourselves be biased by the newspaper reports, by the idle and I fear in some instances the wicked rumours which have passed'. It is in this sense that Chesham's case became a site of struggle about the nature of mothering in mid-Victorian England and this is evident not only within the varying narratives that emerged from the newspapers but also those that were mobilised by the defence and prosecution.

*The Times* noted that 'the case... exhibits features which are scarcely less strange or revolting'. According to *The Times* the features which made this crime revolting and strange were that 'murder was not committed for murder's sake, it was done for hire'. This was due to gossip in the village that Chesham poisoned Solomon Taylor for money. Depictions in newspapers, which cast Chesham in a positive light, were limited even though the witness statements contained positive statements about her. Only two articles from the *Ipswich Journal* and the *Chelmsford Chronicle* during the trial contain any positive mentions of her mothering, her behaviour and her general demeanour. Regardless of the defence's efforts to portray Chesham as a loving mother who would not have poisoned her sons, and indeed had no arsenic in her possession to do so, the newspapers were focused on the prosecution's attempts to discredit Chesham's femininity. The defence soon procured enough witnesses to state that Chesham 'never.. .act[ed] in any manner unlike a kind mother' (George Brookes) and that she was 'looked upon... as a kind and affectionate mother [who] exhibited all the appearances of the mother who had suddenly lost her two children' (Mary Pudding). According to these positive statements to her character, Chesham's maternal feelings, and therefore her femininity, were considered beyond reproach. The prosecution's witnesses stated under cross-examination that Chesham

was a good mother. The defence's strategy of depicting Chesham as a woman unwilling to hurt her children was a necessity because poison had been discovered in the bodies of the two boys. Philip, her oldest son, stated 'his mother treated them all well, she had been a good mother', and the Vicar noted that he 'saw nothing but kindness by her to her children while I was there, she made what is called a good mother'.

The *Chelmsford Chronicle* opted to use the coroner's summation to further its argument that Chesham was a woman with questionable morals. Only one witness could have attested to there possibly being more than just a casual acquaintance between Chesham and Newport, and even then the witness did not appear at the inquest. *The Preston Guardian* wasn't able to offer more than 'several witnesses deposed to having seen Chesham and Newport frequently together' after Newport himself was arrested. The coroner, Charles Carne Lewis, in his summation of the case details to the inquest jury emphasised the possible illicit connection between Chesham and Newport but 'as to the connection said to exist between the woman Chesham, and Mr Thomas Newport, they, the coroner and the jury, all knew a great deal upon that point, but they must dismiss from their minds everything not in evidence'. Just what the connection was between the two was not elaborated upon, but the suggestion was there from the judge and prosecution that Chesham was not only a bad mother, but also a bad wife who was being unfaithful to her husband. However, the judge's suggestion of Chesham's infidelity is only reported in the *Chelmsford Chronicle*, which underlines the importance of not relying only on newspapers, or one newspaper, for interpretation of criminal women's femininity. Chesham's version of the events surrounding the deaths of the children was left unreported by the papers. The witness depositions from the inquest also remain silent about Chesham's statement about the deaths. The narratives competing for the valid depiction of Chesham were from the newspapers, the defence and the prosecution in Chesham's first case.

*The Times* published a letter that was read out in court as evidence against Chesham and Newport. The letter, which never made it past the governor of the Chelmsford Gaol, was the one Chesham instructed to have sent to Newport. In it Chesham states 'you caused the death of my poor children', and continues that 'you deserve to be here more than I do; for it is you who did it'. In the letter, Chesham insists that Newport should support her 'for I am suffering for the crime you did'. The accusations against Newport did not go unheard by the authorities. Charles Carne Lewis, the coroner, quickly dispatched a letter to the Secretary of State asking whether Newport should be apprehended; the answer was an affirmative. Although Newport was socially better situated than Chesham, and even though the local gentry (including Lord Braybrooke) were supporters of the Newport family, it did not help him evade the

authorities. It was also the first piece of strong evidence that the prosecution had against Chesham - it was as close to a confession as they had come.

Thomas Newport never had to stand before the judge to defend himself against Chesham's allegations; with her acquittal there was no case for him to answer. Regardless of the endless negative depictions of Chesham in the newspapers and by the prosecution, the jury found her not guilty and so she was released. The defence's narrative of the kind, caring mother and wife for whom it was 'most improbable, if not indeed impossible that she should have perpetrated such a diabolical act' prevailed, and even the letter to Newport was not considered evidence to the contrary by the jury. The jury's verdict was 'we have no doubt of the child[ren, Joseph and James] being poisoned, but we do not see any proof of who administered it'. Chesham was acquitted and returned to Clavering.

Between 1847, when Chesham returned to Clavering, and 1850, when she was again under arrest, two women were apprehended in Essex and charged with poisoning: Mary May, for poisoning her brother, and Hannah Southgate for poisoning her husband. The public's curiosity in following the criminal proceedings in Essex did not diminish over the years and by September 1850 the focus was again on Chesham and her femininity, this time on trial for the murder of her husband, Richard.

### **Sarah Chesham's Second Trial**

In 1847 Sarah Chesham was acquitted of the murder of her sons and Lydia Taylor's baby. Yet when the details of the inquest into her husband Richard's death appeared, Chesham was deemed guilty from the outset by the newspapers and the prosecution. It seemed that, given the numerous cases involving women using poison to dispose of family members between 1847 and 1850, the authorities and also the wider community became increasingly anxious about a poisoning epidemic. If *The Times* were to be believed, then there was no other crime which could 'create more real terror' than poisoning. *The Times* stated that poisoning had grown into an 'extraordinary and unnatural familiarity' for the people of England. Given that women, and some men like J.S. Mill, were at the time campaigning for legal and social emancipation of women, the fear *The Times* appears to refer to is that women were choosing independence from traditional patriarchal systems of children and family in exchange for a life of independence. The newspaper stated that 'murder itself no longer wore any hideous or repulsive aspect in the eyes of the villagers [women] in question'. According to this article, social controls were failing in the villages of Essex. *The Times* appeared concerned that the time-honoured constraints on committing crime were breaking down and women were

increasingly becoming more likely to transgress rather than conform to societal norms.

The understanding of femininity during that period was that women were much weaker mentally and physically than men, and due to the image of women as mothers, juries were less willing to convict women even when they used the surreptitious method of poisoning to kill. Chesham could not argue that she was sinned against as she was again appearing before the magistrate. The accusation that she had poisoned her husband, slowly, meant Chesham could not claim she was a helpless woman. She was not depicted by the increasingly common image of a weak woman who, in a moment of apparent madness or fear, poisoned her husband. Instead, one narrative that emerged was of Chesham as a mastermind of a poisoning ring; in another she was a woman who killed members of her community in Clavering openly; and across several newspapers the depiction of Chesham was that she was behaving in a diabolical, even witch-like manner. The newspapers each depicted Chesham as a bad woman but there appeared to be little agreement as to how this manifested in her character.

According to the *Daily News*, because Chesham had stated to an acquaintance, Hannah Phillips, that, 'her husband would not dare hit her, and if he ever did so, she would put him under the bricks' she had gained 'terrible celebrity... and the reputation... of being a professional poisoner'. *The Examiner* likewise reported that 'this case excited a good deal of interest on account of the terrible celebrity gained by the prisoner and the reputation she has of being a professed poisoner'. The *Lloyd's Weekly* was one of numerous newspapers to note that 'the abominable system of poisoning that had been going on in the village of Clavering had excited much sensation in this part of the country'. The concern for social commentators was that rather than eliciting repulsion, women like Chesham elicited interest and sensation from other women. On reporting her hanging, the *Chelmsford Chronicle* noted that the scene was 'a sea of heads, a large proportion as always the case at these dreaded scenes from which it would be supposed that women from their very nature would fly with faintness and afright being female'.

Chesham maintained throughout her trial that she was innocent, both of poisoning her sons and of poisoning her husband. Legally Chesham was innocent of the previous crimes; within newspaper articles her acquittal was not taken into account when publishing articles about her husband's death. The *Freeman's Journal* noted that 'there is too much reason to fear that many others had also fallen victims to the evil designs of this wicked wretch', while the *Ipswich Journal* reported that the Secretary of State, Sir George Grey, had called for the coroner to 'put a stop if possible to the system of poisoning which has been carried on for some time past in the

village of Clavering'. Although no exhumations took place, or even suspicions aroused about other deaths in the village, Chesham was labelled a serial poisoner. In an editorial in *The Times*, the complaint was about why Chesham had been allowed to remain free. She had, according to *The Times*, 'led a notorious and almost public career for four years' culminating in the 'murder of that unnatural foulness' that was 'nothing less than wholesale indiscriminate and almost gratuitous assassination': the death of Richard Chesham. In Chesham's second case the focus was on the threat she symbolized to the community; that is to men. In *The Examiner* there appeared a short piece titled 'A Lesson for Juries'. The theme was that poisoners, namely women, were out of control in the country and it was up to the juries (who were comprised wholly of men) to be willing to return guilty verdicts in order to enable judges to pass death sentences on them. Juries and the death penalty also served to protect women from themselves. As the writer argued, 'the jury which acquitted her ... have thus to answer for the blood of four persons, and more than that, for the load of guilt which this woman has since heaped upon her soul'. Thus, if only Chesham would have been imprisoned (or executed) when she was first charged with a murder, she would have been saved from herself. Countering the argument that the death penalty ought to be meted out more frequently, an anonymous letter writer in *Reynolds Newspaper* noted that the death penalty needed to be abolished as 'a woman like Sarah Chesham... might meet this death with an obduracy that divests it of all its terrors and for this reason the penalty is inefficient'. For *The Examiner* Chesham was a dangerous woman who needed to be made an example of and made to pay for her crimes; for campaigners against the death penalty, Chesham became an example of why the death penalty failed to deter others. According to *The Examiner*, it was the duty of men to decide whether a woman lived or died in order to protect other women and other families. From this it followed that Chesham had not only poisoned people in her village but also 'instigated a woman, named May, to poison her husband' and then 'added to her known catalogue of atrocities the murder of her [own] husband'. Husbands were not safe with women like Chesham and May.

*The Times* editorial depicted the scene of arsenic poisonings as the home; it implied that arsenic poisonings only took place inside the domestic sphere and only when women decided to kill. The editorial noted that 'the use of arsenic became a kind of family secret - a weapon in the hands of the weaker vessel by which an ill-favoured husband or a troublesome family might be readily put out of the way'. But a poisoner, that is a woman, would clearly not be able to exercise any control; it wasn't only families at risk but entire communities because 'if they [poisoners] were left at large they would depopulate the neighbourhood'. While the editorial had commenced with a discussion of Chesham and the crime for which she was on trial, a shift took place whereupon Chesham became the

archetypal poisoner. Apparently, Chesham's crime was proof that 'the examples before us are not solitary instances of crime, but rather indications of guiltiness more general than it would be easy to believe' and more damningly 'our village poisoners are worse than the reptiles of the field who discharge their venom only in self-defence'. Chesham was depicted as the monstrous woman: she was out of control and uncontrollable. According to *The Times* 'mothers locked their children up when she was seen about the premises' and 'one witness swore of having saved her own infant by plucking the deadly morsel from its lips'. Many were therefore fearful that Chesham was preying on the innocent and vulnerable of society, and readers were invited to speculate 'what havoc may not have been wrought by a murderess in the full swing of her profession'.

The prosecution, throughout Richard's trial, was focused on the earlier deaths of Joseph and John. Five witnesses called by the prosecution - William and Hannah Phillips, James Parker, John Holgate and Thomas Newport - gave statements about the deaths of the two boys rather than the case of Richard Chesham's death. The prosecution's narrative of Richard Chesham's murder was intertwined with that of the first case against Chesham. According to one statement, a witness, John Holgate commented how 'she seemed very unhappy [while Richard was ill] and... I told her what a serious case it was [the deaths of Joseph and John] and how she had disgraced herself and that everyone disliked her'. The depiction of Chesham's character that emerged from the prosecution's narrative at her second trial was that of a woman shunned by her community, who caused the villagers to be fearful. While this was not evidence of Chesham poisoning her husband, it was used by the prosecution to frame her as a woman disliked and feared by the inhabitants of Clavering.

Although there was no evidence that Chesham and May had ever met, it became helpful to link them however tenuously. May was thought to be connected to more than one poisoning in her area, but this had nothing to do with Chesham (apparently the most infamous Essex poisoner). Although the two women, Chesham and May, were linked in newspaper reports, it is unlikely they ever knew each other. Due to the temporal proximity of the two women appearing before the courts, the use of arsenic in both cases, and both being inhabitants of Essex, the idea of a conspiracy of women poisoning husbands was a story sensationalised by the newspapers. This story helped create an image of a covenant of women around Essex who were plotting to kill men.

The constant proclamations of the newspapers that 'diabolical crimes' were taking place in Essex served to reinforce the image of criminal women as unfeminine: the conjured image was that these women were

witchlike. It had been illegal since 1838 to accuse anyone of being a witch. However, the idea and image of witchcraft and witches had become ingrained in the cultural psyche. At her sentencing Chesham said, 'I am innocent, and wish to be taken before a witch and then you will know who did the poisoning'. Witches were a part of Essex's working-class lives and were not yet discredited by working-class men and women in the mid-19th century. Essex's last well-known and regarded witch, or cunning folk as they preferred to be known, died in 1909. George Pickingill had lived his life, all 93 years of it, in Essex where he was a known cunning man who would help people out whether by calling in witches to do his bidding, or remove hexes and give people charms. Although no one could be accused of witchcraft and taken before the courts for it, or indeed taken seriously if they claimed to believe in it, the image of witches would still have been strong. Labelling the crimes as 'diabolical' or as *The Freeman's Journal* put it 'secret and diabolical acts' served to paint a picture of women who were being underhanded and secretive, the characteristics witches were believed to have.

As *The Times* wrote 'all these cases possessed certain common features of atrocity and terror. Though the deeds actually detected were frightfully numerous, it was reasonably conjectured that many more remained behind, and suspicions were multiplied almost without limit'. Moreover, the report suggested that other women 'locked their children up when she was seen about the premises'. Chesham was described as a woman who committed diabolical acts, a woman of 'gigantic' or 'masculine proportions', and one who 'did not manifest a mother's affection to the child'. She was not feminine or exhibiting the behaviour or looks associated with loving, kind women. Such descriptions served to underline the monstrous looks and nature of Chesham.

As I have illustrated, the newspapers appeared to be in agreement that Chesham was guilty but this was not based on any evidence that she either had arsenic in her possession or that she had been seen administering arsenic to her husband. Instead the focus was on her womanhood and her guilt was deduced from her unfeminine behaviour. Despite the fact that the newspapers shored up the prosecution's narrative by depicting Chesham as a bad mother, she was acquitted. However, at her second trial, she was depicted as guilty from the outset. Indeed, *The Times* concentrated on the threat that Chesham posed to children; *The Examiner* depicted Chesham as a professional poisoner who passed on the secrets of her trade to other women. Through using language that called her crimes 'diabolical', 'professional' and Chesham herself 'wicked' it would appear that the cultural image of witches gained authority in the minds of readers. This image of course was completely at odds with Chesham's repeated protestations of her innocence.

The narratives mobilised in the witness depositions provide an interesting point of comparison with the ways in which Chesham was represented in the legal and media materials. According to the approach I am using, Chesham's own narrative is just as legitimate a source as those produced by the newspapers or in court. Throughout the inquest and at her second trial, Chesham insisted that she was a good wife and had not committed any crime. At Richard's inquest, she said:

I don't know what I have got to stand trial for I have done nothing and I say so both of you Gentlemen and to God that I have done nothing - I did my duty towards him both night and day and it is very hard that I have to stand my trial for that.'

Earlier she had stated 'I am innocent of it as the Lord knows, I am innocent as the Lord Jesus Christ who is now in heaven - I am innocent of everything.'

However, the only glimpse of Chesham's own narrative is that in the witness depositions. In an earlier statement given at the inquest on 3 September, Chesham suggested that it was not she who was in an unhappy relationship with her husband but the principal witness against her, Hannah Phillips. According to Chesham:

He was a good Husband to me. I am sure nobody lived more comfortably together than we did altho' Hannah Phillips says we did not. I did everything for him as far as I could do in every respect. He told Mr Brooks the Clergyman that I had done my duty towards him in everything... I have got nothing to answer for misusing of him not at all.

All Chesham could do to prove her innocence was to name people who were willing to testify that she had been a loving wife and accuse others of committing a crime. The most dangerous thing that could happen to a woman, as this trial showed, was to be accused of poisoning or attempting to poison a husband. Chesham stated that 'I can tell the truth as well as Hannah Phillips - Now I will tell you what she came to ask me... She asked me if I had any poison by me that I could give her that she wanted to give it to her Will'. In order to prove her innocence Chesham pointed to how there were 'three different times she asked me for poison. I told my poor husband, he told me not to say anything about it, there might be a time to speak about it'.

Phillips herself was called as a witness in light of Chesham's allegations. According to Phillips she 'never asked the prisoner if she had any poison by her that she could give me and that I wanted it to give to my Will'. Phillips had to be distanced from Chesham in order to be a credible witness. The entirety of the prosecution's case stood on Phillips'

testimony. According to reporters writing about Phillips' testimony, 'Sarah Chesham had offered to teach her how to use arsenic in order to get rid of her husband'. However, she was a valuable witness because of her insight into the events of the Chesham household and Chesham's behaviour in the village.

The biggest obstacle faced by the coroner, C.C. Lewis, was that the inquest jury had found that Richard Chesham had died from tubercular consumption, not from arsenic poisoning. Lewis instructed his secretary to write to Sir George Grey and seek advice about how to have Chesham brought to justice. Lewis was hoping that the *Offences Against the Person Act*, the one enacted in 1837, would offer the key. In Chapter 85, Section 2 there was the provision to have someone tried with the crime of administering poison with intent to harm or kill. By 1861 the section (23) read:

Whosoever shall unlawfully and maliciously administer to or cause to be administered to or taken by any other person any poison or other destructive or noxious thing, so as thereby to endanger the life of such person, or so as thereby to inflict upon such person any grievous bodily harm, shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable ... to be kept in penal servitude for any term not exceeding ten years.  
<http://www.swarb.co.uk/acts/1861OffencesAgainstThePersonAct.shtml>

In 1851 the crime of poisoning with intent still carried the death penalty. Chesham was the fourth person to be charged with the crime of poisoning with intent. Lewis contacted Taylor for his opinion on whether it would be possible to charge and convict Chesham for poisoning with intent. Taylor replied:

I am afraid that there would be no chance of a conviction if the woman were committed for trial under the Statute for administering poison with intent. Medically speaking the administration at an antecedent period would be only inferential as no poison of the matter vomited during these repeated attacks of illness was analysed. The case therefore stands too much upon presumption. Morally speaking there can be little doubt of arsenic having been the cause of these intermittent attacks of illness but there is a want of that strong medical proof which is necessary for conviction.

The coroner however was driven, to continue investigating, by the 'very strong feeling [which] existed at Clavering that the deceased had been poisoned by his wife'. Lewis also argued that 'the public feeling however is so very strong that some further investigation should take place and it appear[s] so necessary to stop the wretched woman in her horrid career' in hoping that the Home Secretary would see the importance in prosecuting Chesham. Just who had the very strong feeling outside of William and Hannah Phillips that Chesham had indeed poisoned her

husband is not revealed either in the letter or in the trial. *The Examiner* only offered that 'several other witnesses... went on to show that the prisoner, who was commonly called 'Sally Arsenic', was a professed poisoner'. Besides Hannah Phillips' testimony in which she labelled Chesham 'Sally Arsenic', there is no record of any other witnesses using that nickname for her or claiming that Chesham was a poisoner. Analysis of this personal correspondence between the Home Secretary, the coroner and Alfred Swaine Taylor elucidates how Chesham's femininity was created and re-created by these men away from public view to justify arresting and charging her with any crime. Even though there was agreement among them that it would be very hard to charge Chesham, with such a lack of clear evidence against her, she was thought to be a thoroughly 'wretched' woman who posed a grave threat to her community, and must be stopped at all costs'. If we disregard the testimonies of William and Hannah Phillips, there was no one in the village who even hinted at wholesale murder committed in their vicinity. The prosecution was relying solely on William and Hannah Phillips to provide the information from which the narrative of the wayward and threatening woman could be created. William Phillips testified that 'my wife told me about a fortnight after the inquest [into the boys' deaths] that the Prisoner told her that she went to Maunden to poison the child of Lydia Taylor'. This information was four years old, but the prosecution used it to construct Chesham as posing a threat to the entire community. The prosecution sought to use this information to depict Chesham as a woman feared by her peers in her village; that they were afraid to tell the authorities the truth for fear of reprisal. This would appear to support the arguments appearing in the newspapers that there was a fear of secret poisoning and a fear that entire neighbourhoods would be wiped out by poisoners on the loose; if the villagers were scared of Chesham, because of their belief in her guilt, then it would stand to reason that they would not serve as witnesses against her at her trial. However, it could also mean that either the deaths were not viewed suspiciously or Chesham was not considered, by the locals, to be a threat. William Phillips' testimony would support this latter point. Rather than worry about Chesham, William Phillips was worried about how the Newports would respond to his wife's testimony. When discussing Hannah's first appearance at the inquest of Richard's death, 'I told her I thought she had better leave his [Thomas Newport's] name out for that I had been working for nearly thirty years upon Mr. Newport's farm and ... very likely I should be turned out of work'. The fear appears to have been job loss not retribution from a 'professed poisoner'. However, the supposed statement from Chesham to Phillips that 'her husband would not dare hit her, and if he ever did so, she would put him under the bricks', and that 'it was no sin to bury such husbands'. were widely published in the newspapers to underline the unfeminine and dangerous nature of Chesham. In fact even with Phillips' initial evidence that Chesham had returned to Clavering and boasted that

she had got away with the deaths of her children, the jury was convinced that it was a natural death for Richard. Grey's opinion on the other hand was that Chesham should be charged with poisoning with intent.

In a response to C.C. Lewis's query about what could be done to stop Chesham, Grey thought it was necessary to persevere and find evidence that would bring Chesham to justice. Although admitting the evidence thus far was not the best that could be gathered, and that it was highly possible that a jury would not convict her, the go-ahead was given by Grey to stop Chesham by any means necessary. He also noted that 'in a matter of this nature the enquiry for the present had better not be attended with greater publicity than is necessary for the proper conduct of it; for too great publicity might possibly stifle an Investigation already requiring great care and caution'. At the retrial Chesham was found guilty of poisoning with intent and was sentenced to death.

When sentencing Chesham, the judge noted 'he was afraid this was not the only crime of which she'd been guilty... and although she had escaped from that charge [deaths of Joseph and James] justice had overtaken her and she now had only a short time to live'. Chesham's conviction and harsh sentence was possibly due to the crossing over of the narratives from the first case into the narrative about the death of Richard. With the focus in the second case not only on Richard's death, but also on that of her sons, Joseph and James, Chesham's femininity came under harsh scrutiny. Chesham's femininity was not merely constructed, according to the prosecution, as a bad wife, but also as a bad mother, neighbour and a woman who was willing to equip women with the knowledge to poison unwanted husbands. Chesham did not have any defence counsel in the second case, thus there was no positive narrative of her femininity operating in the courtroom. The newspapers' construction of her femininity had become increasingly hostile throughout the years and many were insinuating she was a witch, or at least a witch-like woman. To the Home Secretary, Chesham was a woman who posed a great threat to not only her community but to English society in general. Unlike in the first case where there were positive depictions of her femininity in the courtroom, by her trial and sentencing in 1851 Chesham was stripped of all positive feminine attributes across all narratives.

On 25 March 1851 two people were hanged in front of the Chelmsford Gaol in Essex: one had been found guilty of murder for the death of Jael Denny, and the other was found guilty of poisoning with intent. The first person on the scaffold was Thomas Drory, a young farmer from Doddinghurst, who strangled his pregnant lover, Jael Denny, and dumped her body in a field. The other person was Sarah Chesham (Figures 3 & 4). Chesham's crimes were depicted as unnatural and a result of her monstrous nature as a bad woman; in contrast Drory was depicted as a

man who was intrinsically good, although his crime was committed in a moment of weakness. Unlike Drory, however, greater interest in Sarah Chesham's appearance was absent; attention wasn't on Chesham because of good looks or a respectable background. The media and public coverage of the execution of two criminals, one, Drory, whose innocence was inferred from the fact that he conformed to the normative understanding of masculinity, and the other, Chesham, whose guilt flowed on from the fact that she departed from the norms of femininity, was wide ranging. Across the local and national newspapers reporting on the executions there was curiosity in Chesham's perceived transgressions. Locally the *Chelmsford Chronicle* ran pieces reporting the trials and then executions of Drory and Chesham, and nationally the London papers such as *The Times*, *The Daily News* and *The Morning Chronicle* were interested in the reporting the executions, as was *The Manchester Times*, and even further afield the *Freeman's Journal* in Dublin.

Part of the negative coverage of Chesham's execution built upon the images of her already in circulation as well as her apparent unwillingness to confess to any crimes. Whereas it was assumed that in Drory's case 'satisfactory proofs of sincere repentance were witnessed', Chesham was described as 'the wretched woman [who] has never made anything approaching an admission of a guilty knowledge'. The assumption that Drory's repentance was a sincere one was made on the basis that upon entering jail he 'gave way to a paroxysm of grief' and chose to start attending church services. These factors were taken as evidence of his apparently genuine attempt to repent for his sins, which were not forthcoming from Chesham. Newspaper reports made repeated references to the fact that Chesham was unwilling to go to church or make peace with God. Unlike Drory, Chesham was labelled 'the wretched woman... [who] pertinaciously refused all religious instruction'. According to the reporter, she 'urged that she needed no repentance'. Chesham's refusal to receive religious guidance further underlined the belief of the reading audience that she was unchristian and undeserving of pity. Nor was she willing to confess to any crimes and so the newspapers concluded that 'there [wa]s too much reason to fear that many others had also fallen victims to the evil designs of this wicked wretch'. On the day of her execution Chesham's unwillingness to leave her cell to walk to the scaffold further served to underline her guilt: 'the female convict had expressed an unwillingness to leave her cell, and it was only upon the intimation that if she refused to walk she'd be carried, that she was induced to do so'. At the scaffold she was 'literally brought up by two attendants seeming in a state of great prostration and mental agony'. This was in contrast to Drory who apparently willingly walked to the scaffold. In order to perhaps reassure readers that Chesham was indeed guilty the *Morning Chronicle* reported 'it is the opinion of the reverend chaplain of the gaol, who has had constant opportunities of observing her behaviour, that she has been

most justly convicted'. Confessions were important to the public, newspapers, and the legal community in order to legitimise the death penalty which had been meted out - the condemned had to be seen to accept the sentence by willingly embracing their death in the name of justice. Chesham was not willing to confess to any crimes, no matter how she was pushed to do so by various chaplains or prison officials.

Because no confession was forthcoming from Chesham, the newspapers needed to draw on the depictions of her femininity, and did so in speculating on her behaviour in jail, in order to legitimate the sentence she received. The image of Chesham was as uncaring, unchristian, bad mannered and bad tempered, and unwilling to submit to the authorities in the jail. This served to confirm her guilt. The problem was that, unlike Drory, Chesham maintained her innocence, stating that 'it was hard to die for what she had never done', and that 'though her neck had been put in the halter she was perfectly innocent of the crime for which she had been convicted'. While Chesham offered an explanation for the events of her husband's death, as the *Bristol Mercury* reported 'the statement was of such a rambling character and so utterly incredible that not the slightest importance was attached to it'. What is interesting is that the very same article contained remarks on Drory's statement from the reporter who noted that although 'these statements [in the confession] certainly appear inconsistent at a first glance, yet it is quite possible that they may be all true'. Chesham's story was deemed incredible, yet Drory's, although inconsistent, was considered believable. *The Examiner* summed it up by stating 'if denial of guilt were any proof of innocence Sarah Chesham... was not culpable, but assertions from one so deeply dyed in crime no attention can be paid'.

The image of Chesham as the archetypical poisoning woman also featured in numerous newspaper reports that commented on the hours leading up to her execution. Various newspapers, for instance *The Freeman's Journal*, *The Examiner*, *Chelmsford Chronicle*, *The Times*, *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Daily News*, all published accounts of Chesham's last hours in jail. According to one newspaper, Chesham 'passed the night as the guilty who are about to die impenitent might be expected to endure', whereby her 'mental sufferings were extreme. She never closed her eyes to sleep and could taste no food'. Another newspaper commented that not only could she not close her eyes to sleep, but 'she continued to bewail her fate, and as morning dawned, her eyes assumed a wild aspect'; and another noted that she spent 'Monday night... in a state of deep agitation and agony of mind'. The significance of these reports is that, while in Drory's case the focus was on his attending church services in the chapel, in Chesham's case the interest was in seeing her in discomfort. Drory's actions were viewed as inherently sincere. For Chesham, the attention on her distress was in order to interpret her actions as signs of guilt. Her 'mental agony'

was considered to be the result of her conscience not being cleared; it was not considered to be because of a fear of impending death. In contrast, Drory 'throughout has exhibited a perfect resignation to the justice of his fate' and he 'first ascended... the fatal drop, walking upright and apparently with some firmness'. On walking to the gallows Chesham 'reiterat[ed] her declaration of innocence' but her actual words did not rate a mention. Drory's last words, however, were published verbatim by the newspapers; with the noose around his neck, Drory repeated 'this is the faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief'.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that there were varying depictions of Chesham's femininity across newspapers, in witness depositions and in personal correspondence. Certain narratives were privileged over others. The sensational representation of Chesham in the newspapers, most especially in *The Times*, won greater authority than that of the prosecution's narrative which depicted her as a woman who was poisoning her family. The lack of an apparent motive to her crimes resulted in the newspapers creating a narrative that tapped into the fears of contemporaries - the underhanded, secretive woman who knew how to kill with poison. The prosecution was concentrating on her children's deaths whilst prosecuting her for her husband's death. However, the image utilised in court was one of Chesham as a serial poisoner, a thoroughly reprehensible woman who did away with her family. This was despite the limited evidence against her and rising fears by the local coroner, the judge and the Home Secretary, all of whom became convinced that she might thwart their attempts to bring her to justice.

The issue of mental instability never arose in Chesham's trial. While it was regularly used with middle-class women involved in crime, in Chesham's cases the focus of newspaper narrative was with how immoral and monstrous she was. As the discussion above has highlighted, throughout both trials Chesham was repeatedly described as 'masculine', 'diabolic' and 'wretched' and as unfeminine. Thus, she could be contrasted with all the hallmarks of appropriate femininity: being Christian and loving. According to the prosecutions' narratives, the newspapers, the private correspondence and even the petition, Chesham was the archetypical poisoning woman.

As this article has also illustrated, although newspapers do offer insight into the events surrounding court cases, reliance on them alone fails to take into account other narratives told by individuals who took an interest in or were central to the case. Thus, due to the conservative nature of many newspapers, especially *The Times*, the woman on trial, in this case

Sarah Chesham, had her femininity interpreted through a lens that did not allow a woman to act outside the culturally accepted gender norms; failing to adhere resulted in a negative depiction. Through using the trial of an alleged poisoner to investigate competing narratives about femininity, the distinctions between newspapers and other sites of narrative creation become more focused and illustrates that not all narratives align and that struggles are not easily resolved.

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**Note:** This article is an edited extract taken from the author's PhD thesis entitled '*Stop the Wretched Woman in her Horrid Career'. A Study of Competing Representations of Femininity in Social and Legal Responses to Female Poisoners, 1846-1851*' (2011), undertaken for the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research School of Political and Social Inquiry in Australia. A book has since been published, based on the thesis: *Nineteenth-century Female Poisoners: Three English Women who used Arsenic to kill* (2015).

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