

The Ordeal of Sarah Chesham

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of History

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Between 1847 and 1851, a series of criminal trials took place in Essex, England, involving a number of women accused of fatally poisoning their husbands and children and even complete strangers. This thesis analyzes the Essex cases and their representation in the Victorian press. It focuses quite intensively on the legal proceedings involved in the Essex cases but also examines issues such as the emergence of toxicology, the availability of arsenic and the campaign against burial societies, issues which informed both the Victorian press's treatment of the Essex cases and public responses to the story. This thesis challenges and critiques the dominant narrative of the Essex poisonings by revealing the gap between what the press claimed and the evidence actually offered in court and draws from the voluminous media coverage these cases generated to explain how and why this particular episode occurred at this particular historical moment.

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Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Angus McLaren, Dr. Lynne Marks and Dr. Lisa Surridge. I am also grateful to Heather Waterlander in the Department of History for all her assistance with the administrative aspect of my degree. The Faculty of Graduate Studies granted me an extension when I badly needed one. My family was a constant source of encouragement and support throughout this project. My husband, Martin, and I were expecting our second child when I began graduate school, and I submit my thesis on her sixth birthday. It seems appropriate, then, to dedicate this to my children, Ciaran and Nora.

Introduction

In the summer of 1846 in the county of Essex, in southeast England, a young mother named Lydia Taylor accused a neighbour named Sarah Chesham of repeatedly administering poison to Taylor's newborn baby, with the intent of murdering him. Taylor's accusation quickly gave rise to the suspicion that Chesham had also fatally poisoned two of her own children. Then, in 1848 Mary May, a woman living in another Essex village, was hanged for the arsenic murder of her half-brother, and a third woman, Hannah Southgate, stood accused of using arsenic to rid herself of her husband. When the authorities investigated Southgate, suspicions and accusations heightened and spread. Regional gossip attributed the deaths of all of Mary May's children to arsenic and accused three other widows of having poisoned their respective spouses. One of the prosecution's most eager witnesses against Hannah Southgate even found herself briefly suspected of the deaths of her own children. A "horrible system of poisoning" pervaded Essex, according to the press. The people of Sarah Chesham's village, *The Times* claimed, knew her as someone who would poison for a price: her "employment was as well known as that of a nurse or

a washerwoman”.¹ *The Times* confidently predicted “the conviction of a large number of women” who allegedly counseled and encouraged one another in the successful administration of arsenic in order to obtain the benefits paid out by burial clubs, subscription-based societies that provided the poor with small amounts of money to pay funeral expenses.² The scandal waned only when Sarah Chesham, though acquitted of child poisoning, was hanged for administering arsenic to her husband with the intent to murder him.

“Why should the practice of secret poisoning obtain rather in the marshes of Essex than elsewhere?” *The Times* wondered.³ In part, the press blamed the crimes on the availability of arsenic, which anyone could legally purchase and which was a staple in many Victorian homes. The promise of easy money that burial societies offered the poor was also identified as a contributing factor. According to Edwin Chadwick’s 1843 report on burial practices and their public health implications, poor mothers allowed their children to die so they could collect the burial fees.⁴ These ideas, which demonized working-class mothers, were widely disseminated by a press that happily publicized each accusation of criminal poisoning and every claim that the

¹ “When we directed public attention . . . ,” *Times*, September 21, 1846, 4. When a newspaper article was published without a headline, I quote the first few words of the first sentence to aid in location.

² “The Essex Poisonings,” *Times*, September 21, 1848, 5; “Murders by Poisoning,” *Times*, August 31, 1848, 7.

³ “The case of the Essex poisoners . . . ,” *Times*, September 1, 1848, 4.

⁴ Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain: A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry Into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: W. Clowes & Son, 1843), 64-65.

poor reacted with indifference or even joy when their young children died. Novelists jumped on the bandwagon: in his 1845 novel, *Sybil*, Benjamin Disraeli, who claimed that “[i]nfanticide is practised as extensively and as legally in England, as it is on the banks of the Ganges,” included a working-class mother who promised to repay a debt just as soon as her ailing child died and she received its burial fees.⁵ The Essex women’s particular susceptibility to these temptations, and the supposed failure of their communities to recognize what was happening and speak out about it, were attributed to the general ignorance, immorality and savagery of the county, which *The Times* depicted as a foreign land, an “uneducated county” where “cold-blooded murder” met with “popular favour”.⁶

I first encountered the Essex cases several years ago, while working my way through reports in *The Times* of women accused of violent crimes. Having already digested 15 years’ worth of articles, I knew that the reality of women’s criminality in the nineteenth century was far more varied and complex than the arsenic-wielding wife — “Circe in crinoline,” as George Robb puts it — of popular imagination.⁷ I had read about women and girls, almost all of them poor, accused of bludgeoning, stabbing, shooting, suffocating, acid throwing, drugging and

⁵ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (London: Penguin, 1980), 130 and 197-198.

⁶ “When we directed public attention . . .,” *Times*, September 21, 1846, 4.

⁷ George Robb, “Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England,” *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 1997), 176-190.

administering various types of poisons. Their alleged victims included their spouses and children, lovers (both past and present), friends, enemies, neighbours, employers, servants and strangers. None of those cases, however, prepared me for what I encountered as I read the reports of the Essex trials. Trained to read against the grain, I was immediately skeptical about *The Times*'s depiction of Essex as a strange place where murder by poisoning was a rural tradition and women routinely conspired together to murder unwanted husbands and surplus children. When I expanded my research to include surviving archival records and other newspapers and periodicals, I realized the extent of *The Times*'s inaccurate and biased coverage and began to suspect that an appalling miscarriage of justice had taken place.

Although the Essex cases languished in obscurity for many years — neither famous nor instructive enough to qualify for inclusion in the *Notable British Trials*, the series of edited and published transcripts of cases that serve as an important source for many historians — in recent years a number of academic studies have cited them. Journalism professor Judith Knelman includes the Essex poisonings as part of her study of media sensationalism in Victorian women's murder trials. Historian Ian Burney mentions them in his 2006 book *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, as does George Robb in his journal article about husband poisonings.

Most recently, the Essex trials figure in James C. Whorton's comprehensive study of how arsenic pervaded daily life in the nineteenth century.⁸

Existing scholarly treatments of the Essex cases presume that the narrative of the Victorian press is a reliable and factual report of what happened and do little more than cite the cases to illustrate their own project's particular point, quoting the most sensational lines in press's editorials without questioning the accuracy of the press's version of events. Only Judith Flanders, a non-academic, questions the press's version, but her discussion is a small part of a much larger examination of a century's worth of sensational trials and popular culture.⁹

This thesis is the first comprehensive study of the Essex cases and their representation in the Victorian press. It focuses quite intensively on the legal proceedings involved in the Essex cases but also examines issues such as the emergence of toxicology, the availability of arsenic and the campaign against burial societies which informed both the Victorian press's treatment of the Essex cases and public responses to the story told in the papers' densely printed columns. A number of existing studies of the social and cultural history of Victorian crime have directly shaped my project, and before plunging into the narrative and analysis of the Essex cases, it may

⁸ Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 60-65; Ian Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 26-32; James C. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 35-40.

⁹ Judith Flanders, *The Invention of Murder* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 239-245.

be useful to review these and address some of the theoretical issues that I wrestled with while researching and writing this thesis.

One of the first studies to combine social and cultural history with the study of violent crime was self-described “amateur social historian” and literary scholar Richard D. Altick’s *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, an examination of a number of prominent criminal cases and the cultural representation of murder. Altick describes murder as a “crimson thread through Victorian social history,” and since the publication of his book in 1970, many other academics have pursued the crimson thread.¹⁰ Mary Hartman followed Altick with the publication in 1977 of *Victorian Murderesses*, a study of the highly publicized cases of thirteen “respectable” French and English women accused, or at least suspected, of murder.¹¹ Michael Alpert uses a single prominent criminal trial from 1849, the prosecution of Frederick and Maria Manning for the murder of a friend who was intimately involved with Mrs. Manning before her marriage.¹² In *A Prescription for Murder*, Angus McLaren focuses on the case of a serial-killing physician,¹³ while the murder of a rural Irishwoman is the subject of both the literary scholar Angela

¹⁰ Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 9.

¹¹ Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (London: Robson Books, 1985).

¹² Michael Alpert, *London 1849: A Victorian Murder Story* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004).

¹³ Angus McLaren, *A Prescription for Murder: The Victorian Serial Killings of Dr. Thomas Neill Cream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Bourke's *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* and the historians Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates's *The Cooper's Wife is Missing*.¹⁴

Other scholars have taken a less case-specific approach: Martin J. Wiener examines male violence and Victorian masculinity; Ruth Ellen Homrighaus analyzes the *British Medical Journal*'s investigation and exposure of baby farming, using this particular moral panic to examine the medical profession's attitude toward working-class mothers; Joel Peter Eigen focuses on cases in which the accused were allegedly unaware of their violent acts to analyze the gap between medical and legal conceptions of individual responsibility; A. James Hammerton and Shani d'Cruze examine domestic violence; and Lionel Rose, George K. Behlmer and Louise A. Jackson study violent crimes against children.¹⁵ Several recent books by non-academic historians also focus on Victorian crime: Kate Summerscale recently published a prize-winning

¹⁴ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Joan Hoff and Marion Yeates, *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

¹⁵ Wiener, Martin J. *"Men of Blood": Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ruth Ellen Homrighaus, "Wolves in Women's Clothing: Baby-Farming and the *British Medical Journal*, 1860-1872," *Journal of Family History* Vol. 26 No. 3 (July 2001), 350-372; Joel Peter Eigen, *Unconscious Crime: Mental Absence and Criminal Responsibility in Victorian London* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003); A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992); Shani d'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Lionel Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain, 1800-1939* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1986); George K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2000).

study of the Constance Kent case, James Ruddick writes about Florence Bravo, and Sarah Wise examines a long-forgotten case of body-snatching in London.¹⁶

Two studies that have particularly influenced this thesis, albeit in very different ways, are Judith Knelman's *Twisting in the Wind* and Mary Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses*. I hope this thesis will serve as a counterpoint to the treatment of the Essex poisonings in Knelman's study, as well as in other academic work. Knelman and I share an interest in the media representation of Victorian women accused of violent crimes, but our approaches, uses of sources and conclusions differ dramatically. Knelman draws from extensive newspaper research to examine the fifty "most notorious accused murderesses" in the years 1807 to 1899 and their treatment in the pages of the Victorian press. She might have explained why some murders and not others touched a social nerve and were sensationalized by the press, the extent to which the media determined which crimes would touch a social nerve, and asked how sensational coverage affected the outcome of a trial. She could have looked beneath the sensationalistic claims of the newspaper reports and noticed the frequent absence of proof of such claims. Instead, she treats her source material as consistently accurate and reliable, reproducing many of the newspaper's errors and

¹⁶ Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); James Ruddick, *Death at the Priory: Sex, Love, and Murder in Victorian England* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001); Sarah Wise, *The Italian Boy: Murder and Grave-Robbery in 1830s London* (London: Pimlico, 2005).

even introducing some of her own and, like the newspapers whose biases she purports to critique, regards many of the women in her book as aberrations, “a perversion of the feminine nature.”

Knelman labels various defendants as “vicious,” “thoroughly disreputable,” and “hardened criminals”; she is obviously judgmental, typically focusing on the accused’s alleged sexual promiscuity and even describes one woman as “justly hated for her gratuitous brutality.” Knelman presents Sarah Chesham as “every man’s worst nightmare: a woman who could not be controlled, who had no conscience, and who had the means to kill secretly.” Women in general she locates on the margins of society; the lives of women of the “lower classes” were “limited”. For Knelman, the Essex cases are but one more example of how women who killed were social outcasts who lacked education and “moral training” — a theory that conflates working-class status with immorality and is lifted directly from the middle-class Victorian press, which often pointed to the absence of “moral training” when attempting to account for female violence.¹⁷

This thesis is predicated on the belief that the vast majority of women accused of violent crimes, regardless of their characterization in court or the press, were ordinary women, not much different from others of their social class and time, and can be best understood within the social context in which they lived. Histories of Victorian women often involve lengthy discussions of

¹⁷ Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 21, 58, 70, 77, 91, 128, 65, 10 and 227.

domestic ideology, a theory of gender roles that divided the world into public/male and private/female spheres and idealized middle-class women as “the angel in the house”. Although some scholars of crime invoke domestic ideology to explain women’s courtroom experiences, linking verdicts and sentences to an individual defendant’s deviance from women’s prescribed role or to her ability to manipulate chivalric impulses in court, to date no one has undertaken the kind of comprehensive analysis of court records that would reveal a clear pattern of such attitudes directly affecting verdicts and sentences.¹⁸ Judith Knelman’s categorization of many of the “murderesses” in her study as evil or insane is predicated on the assumption that domestic ideology was the yardstick by which all Victorian women were measured, but nothing in the Essex trials suggests that domestic ideology played a role in the outcomes of the cases.

The pages that follow owe a considerable debt to Mary Hartman’s *Victorian Murderesses*. Hartman’s research broke new ground, but not because she unearthed long-buried cases or discovered a trove of previously unused archival material or painted a full picture of women’s experiences with Victorian criminal justice. Most of the British women she wrote about were middle class and their cases were included in the *Notable British Trials* series, but the

¹⁸ “Criminal women,” writes Lucia Zedner in her important study *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*, “were perceived and judged against complex, carefully constructed notions of ideal womanhood.” Zedner acknowledges, however, the need for further study to determine the extent to which social attitudes directly affected the outcomes of trials. *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 11 and 30.

average woman accused of murder in the nineteenth century was wretchedly poor. Rather, Hartman's innovation was recognizing that while her subjects' recourse to violence — or, at the very least, the allegation that they had committed murder — marked them as unusual, they remained “ordinary women who found extreme solutions to ordinary problems.”¹⁹

Hartman's analyses “stress the ways in which the women's lives were linked to those of their more typical female peers” and seek to “focus on their collective contribution to our understanding of their less sensational sisters.”²⁰ Of the thirteen accused or suspected killers who comprise her study, Hartman writes: “The circumstances which prompted their actions, the stratagems they employed, and the public responses to their reported behavior display a pattern which suggests that, far from committing a set of isolated acts, the women may all have been responding to situations which to some degree were built into the lives of their more ordinary middle-class peers.”²¹ Hartman's interest lies in the social context in which these alleged crimes took place. For example, the story of Constance Kent, who confessed to the murder of her young half-brother, shares a chapter with the trial of Celestine Doudet. Other than the fact that both women were held responsible for the death of a child, their crimes seemingly had little in common, but Hartman sees that Kent, the profoundly unhappy teenage daughter of a factory

¹⁹ Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 3.

²⁰ Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, ix.

²¹ Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 2.

inspector, and Doudet, a French governess accused of physically abusing her charges, one of them to death, shared a fate as “singular outcasts” whose stories, Hartman writes, “can be used to understand much that formed the fabric of existence for more ordinary young women whose chances to achieve the one vocation their society sanctioned for them, marriage and motherhood, were compromised”.²²

Hartman’s work is an outstanding example of how an appropriately contextualized crime can enhance understandings of much more than its immediate circumstances. Two more recent studies attempt variations on Hartman’s approach but with decidedly mixed results. Michael Alpert’s book *London 1849* uses the Frederick and Maria Manning case as a point of departure for examining “food, clothes, medicine, entertainment, communications, and the multifarious picture . . . of ordinary people’s lives in London at mid-century.”²³ But Alpert fails to demonstrate that the Manning case was particularly representative of its time and place or to root his discussion of social history in the crime. He writes about the murderous couple only in his first and last chapters, devoting the other eight to brief and very general discussions of clothing, transportation, entertainment, food, housing and religion, none of them illuminated by or particularly central to the crime. In *The Cooper’s Wife is Missing*, one of two academic studies of

²² Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 87.

²³ Alpert, *London 1849*, 1.

the murder of an Irishwoman whose husband and family members believed had been taken by the fairies and replaced with a changeling, Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates use the Cleary case as a pretext for a discussion of national politics and religion in 1890s Ireland. Their long first chapter is almost entirely about major political and religious events and figures with no direct connection to the murder; the Clearys themselves are mentioned only in the chapter's closing paragraphs, and the second chapter swiftly resumes the political and religious discussion. Bridget Cleary's death certainly functioned in ongoing debates about the viability of Home Rule and in the Catholic church's efforts to become the dominant force in Irish life, as Angela Bourke notes in her own book about the case, but the people directly involved in her murder did not conceive of it as either a political or religious act, and the community in which the crime occurred did not interpret it as such. Angela Bourke, accordingly, roots her analysis in a close study of rural Irish life and folklore, two factors most obviously relevant to the murder.

This thesis challenges and critiques the dominant narrative of the Essex poisonings by revealing the gap between what the press claimed and the evidence actually offered in court and draws from the voluminous media coverage these cases generated to explain how and why this particular episode occurred at this particular historical moment. In the absence of a published trial transcript or complete court records, I exploit the press's reports of the inquest and trial proceedings to provide the factual information needed to piece together my account. More than

thirty-five separate newspapers published reports about the alleged poisonings, making the story notorious throughout the United Kingdom.²⁴ By the 1840s, *The Times* produced sufficient copies on its state-of-the-art press to satisfy its London readers and used the railways to distribute its papers throughout the country. The invention of the electric telegraph in 1844 further facilitated the sharing of news and information and allowed reporters to file a story and then transmit last-minute details, such as the verdict at the end of a long trial, before the paper went to press. Many communities also had their own local newspapers, typically published on a weekly basis: numerous provincial papers were founded in the eighteenth century, including the *Newcastle Courant* (1711) and *Ipswich Journal* (1720). By 1840 more than 5,000 newspapers were published each week in the city of Sheffield, which had a population of less than 100,000.²⁵

²⁴ This figure derives from the newspapers whose articles I used when researching this thesis, using the British Library's on-line nineteenth-century newspaper database. The database does not include every title in the British Library's collection. The *Chelmsford Chronicle*, for example, published articles about the Essex poisonings, some of which were reprinted in other papers, but is not part of the newspaper database.

²⁵ *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, March 28, 1840, 8. That dozens of newspapers carried stories about the Essex poisonings may create the image of swarms of reporters descending on Clavering, Wix, Tendring and Chelmsford. In fact, what people from all social classes and throughout Britain knew about the Essex poisonings originated with just a few reporters, undoubtedly male and all of them anonymous. Of the dozens of newspapers that printed stories about the Essex poisonings, only a few published original accounts. The "early provincial papers," media historian Bob Clarke notes, "were essentially scissor-and-paste affairs put together by the local jobbing printer and published once a week." Some provincial papers used the lengthy articles published by other papers as the basis for their own greatly reduced and not always accurate synopses. Bob Clarke, *From Grub Street to Fleet Street: An Illustrated History of English Newspapers to 1899* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 106-107.

The press's influence extended beyond those with the means and ability to purchase and read newspapers. Before the invention of print and the pamphlets and newsbooks that preceded daily and weekly newspapers, news circulated orally. At the time of the Essex poisonings, many people heard the news through other people, but this news was more likely to be closely connected to its original source. People who could read and could afford to purchase a newspaper shared its content with relatives, friends and neighbours who could not, and as a result the number of people exposed to the newspaper's version of events was much larger than an individual paper's circulation. A newspaper like *The Times*, with the resources to send reporters to cover events and to circulate its papers widely, occupied a powerful position, its content read or at least known even by those who did not read *The Times* itself.

Newspapers articles form a narrative that, like any historical source, demands critical analysis. Errors riddled the coverage of the Essex poisonings, some of which likely resulted from the conditions in which reporters worked and the logistics of newspaper production. Reporters who attended the legal proceedings recorded the speech in shorthand. They took what shortcuts they could, concentrating on the words of the people in the witness box. "I am a widow and live at Clavering," began Margaret Mynott's testimony against Sarah Chesham. "I know the prisoner and remember the death of her children in January, 1845; about a fortnight before that the prisoner asked me to get her some arsenic, for which she gave me 2b. [sic]; the same week

Joseph came and asked for it; I gave him the 2d., and told him to tell his mother I had forgotten it.”²⁶ Although Mynott appears to have spoken without interruption, each semicolon probably marks the place where the prosecution posed a question, the nature of which a reader can reasonably infer from the answer given. Sadly for scholars, reporters (or their editors) too often considered the speeches made by the prosecutors, the defense and the judge extraneous matter, and either paraphrased or completely omitted them.

Given the speed with which reporters and editors worked and the absence of systematic fact-checking, errors inevitably entered the record. Many of these had no meaningful impact on the story, as when *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* changed Sarah Chesham's name to Sarah Chesman, or the *Essex Standard* spelled Margaret Mynott's surname Minot. Other errors were more substantive, however. Some of these may have crept in when one newspaper made cuts to or completely paraphrased a more detailed article originally published by another paper. The *Exeter Flying Post's* assertion that three of Sarah Chesham's sons had tested positive for arsenic may have been the result of hasty and careless editing. It is worth noting, however, that none of these mistakes worked to the advantage of the accused women. The newspapers never, for example, *reduced* the number of alleged victims.

²⁶ “The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

My use of the press reports differs from my academic predecessors in two ways. Unlike other scholarly treatments, which have relied heavily on the coverage in *The Times*, I have read the coverage in thirty-four separate periodicals, thanks to the British Library's on-line database of many of its nineteenth-century newspapers. Although *The Times*'s size and resources made it the most influential and widely read newspaper at the time, one local paper, the *Essex Standard*, provided more thorough and accurate coverage of the trials and enabled me to fill in many of the gaps left by *The Times* and other papers and to test the press's most sensational claims. More importantly, I read these newspapers with a skeptical eye, always looking for evidence to support the press's assertions. Instead of simply perpetuating the press's characterization of Sarah Chesham as a well-known and professional poisoner, for example, I searched the inquest and trial reports for testimony from people who knew her that described her in those terms.

This thesis is in the awkward position of relying on the very source that it critiques, which raises the question of how to determine what constitutes reliable information. The duplication of articles (see footnote 25) means that this difficulty cannot be fully resolved simply by reading a wide variety of publications. In general, my analysis privileges the reports in the *Essex Standard*, because this newspaper printed articles that predated reports in other papers often enough for me to reasonably conclude that it was publishing original articles and not merely reprinting or synthesizing from other newspapers, and because this paper's articles

omitted many of the outlandish and unsubstantiated claims and fundamental errors that characterized so much of the reportage of, for example, *The Times*. I must acknowledge, however, that the volume of articles examined during the researching and writing of this thesis does not entirely compensate for the absence of complete trial records.

Chapter One, “Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” reconstructs the investigation and prosecution of the alleged poisonings. Chapter Two, “Context,” turns to the broader context that shaped the Essex poison trials. The 1840s was a troubled decade in English history. An economic depression that began in 1836 had not lifted and brought with it low wages and high unemployment. The Corn Laws, introduced to protect domestic agriculture, resulted in inflated prices for corn, wheat and other grains, putting the cost of a loaf of bread beyond the means of many. In the summer of 1842, industrial strikes and riots broke out, raising the specter of social revolution. These were also the years in which newspaper journalists, medical professionals and legislators pointed to the sudden prominence of poison stories in the columns of the Victorian press as proof that an epidemic of “secret poisoning” was a real and growing social problem. *The Times* described poisoning as a “moral epidemic far more formidable than any plague which we are likely to see imported from the East.”²⁷ This alleged epidemic exacerbated fears of the working class. Poisoning revealed the “barbarism and brutality among the peasantry and

²⁷ “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . . ,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4.

artizans,” the *Daily News* editorialized in 1847, and even today some scholars attribute the supposed poisoning epidemic in the 1840s to working-class women’s efforts to reduce the number of hungry mouths at the table.²⁸

Chapter Three, “The Myth of Sally Arsenic,” argues that these ideas created a moral panic and prepared the ground for the emergence of the Essex accusations, and exposes the considerable gap between what the press alleged and what the evidence actually demonstrated. Through exaggerations, substantive errors, the elision of events, and allegations so completely unsupported that they can only be considered fabrications, the Victorian press crafted a narrative highly biased against the three defendants, one that left little room for readers to doubt that “secret poisonings” were suddenly a major social threat in Essex. This narrative established two primary ideas: first, that in Essex husbands and children died of poison either without arousing suspicion or with nobody considering this a crime; and second, that an organized system of poison orchestrated the deaths of husbands and children.

The historiography of crime has flourished since social historians first began studying institutional responses as an instrument of social control and criminal acts as a form of social protest, but in a sense it remains a marginalized field. Histories of Victorian childhood, for

²⁸ “There are two classes of remedies . . . ,” *Daily News*, August 10, 1847, 1, and Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 47 and 49-50.

example, make no mention of the alleged epidemic of child poisonings in the 1840s or the claim that working-class families encouraged child death in order to obtain burial fees. The Essex cases do not figure in general studies of nineteenth-century rural England. Statistically speaking, crimes such as these touched very few lives directly. For most Victorians, violent crime was thrilling to read about in the press precisely because they could think about it in the abstract, “like hearing blustery rain on the windowpane when sitting indoors.”²⁹ Anomalous though the Essex cases may be, this episode nonetheless deserves attention, for it occurred at a formative moment in the development of ideas about Victorian women and poison, ideas that resonated throughout the century, affecting public policy debates and re-emerging during other outbreaks of poison panics. The narrative of these cases that the Victorian press created determined how these cases were represented for too long. This thesis argues that, contrary to what other scholars have assumed, the Victorian press did not simply report what happened. Rather, the press created a myth, one with little basis in reality but with tragic consequences.

²⁹ Flanders, *The Invention of Murder*, 1.

Chapter One:

“Mysterious Poisonings in Essex”

Sarah Chesham, 1846-1847

The British public first became aware of what would eventually be known as the Essex poisoning ring in the summer of 1846, when newspapers reported proceedings taking place in the magistrates’ court in the village of Newport. Lydia Taylor, a resident of the nearby village of Manuden, accused Sarah Chesham of Clavering with administering, on multiple occasions, poison to Solomon Taylor, her “illegitimate male child.”¹

Today Essex, the county that lies to the northeast of London, is home to one of the capital’s three major airports, and many Essex residents commute to London to work, but in 1846 the county was rural and secluded. At the time of the 1841 census, the population in Clavering numbered 1,170. The inhabitants worked as agricultural labourers, farmers, bricklayers, shopkeepers, glaziers, publicans, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, harness makers, millers, carpenters, schoolteachers and butchers. Women participated in paid work: Susan Webb, Hannah Clayden and Hannah Banks were young widows who supported themselves and their

¹ “Suspected Poisonings,” *Times*, August 20, 1846, 5. This article, with minor variations, also appeared in the *Ipswich Journal*, August 22, 1846, 3, and the *Glasgow Herald*, August 24, 1846, 4.

children through agricultural labour; Louisa Claydon kept a beershop; Rebecca Green was a dressmaker; Susan Barker was a charwoman; and Fanny Clayden, Anne Creswick and Ann Law taught school.² Many nineteenth-century women who needed to work found employment as domestic servants, and the census records a number of adolescent girls and young women who worked as live-in servants. Clavering Hall employed four female domestics, three of them just fifteen years old, as well as one manservant. Some working-class families also employed household help, typically girls or boys who worked for little more than the cost of their board.

Early Victorian Clavering was not a wealthy place. Farm work paid poorly, and more than a dozen people were recorded as “pauper” in the 1841 census. These people somehow found the means to stay in the village and out of the union workhouse in Saffron Walden that, in 1834, forced the closure of the Clavering poorhouse. But despite the poverty, Clavering was, according to one newspaper, “a generally secluded and beautifully rural village”.³ By 1846, the village was home to three churches: an Anglican church built in the fifteenth century; a Congregational church established in the late eighteenth century, and a Methodist chapel built in 1844. The village had two schools — the British School, established in 1838 and run by the Congregational

² I am indebted to local historian Jacqueline Cooper for the information about Clavering history provided online at http://www.claveringonline.org.uk/Local%20History/parish_history.html. Census data is also available in a slightly different format at <http://essex1841.com/Clavering-1841.php>.

³ “Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden,” *Essex Standard and General Advertiser*, August 21, 1846, 2. I abbreviate this publication title to *Essex Standard* in subsequent citations.

Church, and the Church of England's National School, which opened in 1843 — and one public house and inn, the Fox and Hounds, which still stands (at the other end of the village, present day visitors can find Clavering's other pub, The Cricketers, which is owned by the parents of chef Jamie Oliver, who grew up in Clavering). The villagers were not unfamiliar with the types of crime common in rural areas (poaching, drunken fights, petty thieving, retaliatory acts of arson), but they would have been quite unused to the furor that Lydia Taylor's allegations about Sarah Chesham unleashed.

In October 1844, Lydia Taylor left her home in the village of Manuden to enter domestic employment at Dance's Farm, Clavering, the home of Thomas Newport, a farmer, and his elderly mother.⁴ The Newports were prosperous tenant farmers, especially in comparison to most of their neighbours.⁵ Like many young female domestics, Lydia Taylor was vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Taylor told the magistrates that in the spring of 1845, "Mrs. Newport charged me with being in the family-way. I said it was so. She asked who by? I said by her son, Mr. Thomas Newport." Newport offered to get Taylor "a little medicine" to "take it all away in a few days"

⁴ "Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden," *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2. The 1841 census lists a twenty-five-year-old farmer named Thomas Newport.

⁵ Later on, when Thomas Newport was arrested, his mother reportedly offered the policemen who took him into custody £100 to allow her son to spend one last night at home, which they declined, and Newport had no difficulty in hiring a solicitor to represent him and posting bail. "The Clavering Poisoning Cases," *Ipswich Journal*, January 23, 1847, 3.

which “would be a great deal better for me and him too”. “I said I would do no such thing,” she testified. “As it was so, it should remain so, till the Almighty pleased to deliver me.” Two days later, Lydia Taylor returned to her mother’s house in Manuden, where, on December 16, 1845, she gave birth to a son she named Solomon.⁶

Within weeks of the birth, according to Taylor’s testimony, Sarah Chesham came calling. Chesham was thirty-five years old and she lived in Clavering with her husband, an agricultural labourer, and three of their four surviving children (two sons had died in January 1845), ranging in age from seven to fifteen; her eldest child, a seventeen-year-old daughter named Harriet, had left the village, probably for work.

Chesham’s visit surprised Lydia Taylor, who described her as someone she “had not spoken to . . . above twice before”. Chesham, she claimed, called Thomas Newport “a poor good-for-nothing sorry fellow” who “should not have done such a thing”. “She pitied me, and seemed to be a great friend to me,” Taylor said. Chesham promised to visit again and came a month later, bringing with her “a rice pudding, an apple turnover, and some butter, tea, and sugar; she kept pitying me and slighting Mr. Thomas Newport.” As Taylor, her mother and Chesham sat down to eat, the baby “became very ill, and appeared as if it could not move,” Taylor testified. “It was then in the prisoner’s arms.” Taylor immediately took Solomon from

⁶ “Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2.

Chesham and asked her: “What have you been giving him?” Chesham replied, “Nothing but a piece of sugar.” Solomon’s mouth was white and slimy. “The child was convulsed,” Taylor said, “and its lower jaw dropped as if it were dying.” Since that visit, she testified, Solomon remained “very ill and wasted.”⁷

Taylor and her mother were suspicious enough of Chesham that they were “afraid to eat any of the things she had left, and threw them away.” Despite their suspicions, Taylor alleged that Chesham administered poison to Solomon a second time, when she “snatched” the baby from his mother’s hands and took him out to a field, apparently with the aim of confronting Thomas Newport with his illegitimate son. Taylor also described an episode in which she and Chesham were walking together and Chesham offered Solomon “something like a sucker,” which Taylor refused. By June 1846, Taylor had left Solomon in her mother’s care and went to Stansted, a nearby village, to work as a domestic for a local doctor and his family. Taylor’s mother testified that Chesham paid a visit on June 13 and was able to take Solomon out of Mrs. Taylor’s sight just long enough to put something into his mouth.⁸ Again Solomon Taylor went into convulsions and “manifested the usual symptoms of being poisoned.”⁹ Chesham “decamped and escaped detection,” according to *The Times* and the *Ipswich Journal*, until the local constable

⁷ “Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2.

⁸ “Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2.

⁹ “Suspected Poisonings,” *Ipswich Journal*, August 22, 1846, 3.

apprehended her. He searched Chesham's home and seized "a number of galley-pots, filled with various sorts of ointments". The magistrates ordered that their contents "undergo a strict chymical examination" in London and committed Chesham for trial at the next assizes. Chesham, unable to raise the funds to post bail, was taken the fifty kilometers from Clavering to the Springfield Gaol in Chelmsford, the county town, and bound over for trial at the next assizes.¹⁰

Even as the magistrates committed Chesham for trial on a charge of attempted poisoning, apparently not feeling the need to wait for physical evidence to support Lydia Taylor's accusations, "other matters of a very dark appearance," as the *Essex Standard* put it, heightened the suspicions about her.¹¹ During an initial, private hearing into Lydia Taylor's accusation, someone mentioned the deaths of two of Sarah Chesham's sons, Joseph and James, ages ten and eight respectively, who in January 1845 succumbed to a sudden and violent illness. The magistrates passed this information to the coroner, who ordered the immediate exhumation of the two boys' bodies. On the same day that the magistrates' court in Newport continued to hear Lydia Taylor's accusations, the single coffin that held the two corpses was unearthed in Clavering and an inquest into their deaths began. The boys' paternal grandmother had the

¹⁰ "Suspected Poisonings," *Times*, August 20, 1846, 5, "Suspected Poisonings," *Ipswich Journal*, August 22, 1846, 3.

¹¹ "Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden," *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2.

unpleasant task of identifying the bodies before a local surgeon removed the stomachs, wrapped them in cloth and delivered them to a Professor Graham at University College London. Professor Graham in turn sent the stomachs to Alfred Swaine Taylor, a professor of chemistry and medical jurisprudence at Guy's Hospital, who was already gaining a reputation as an expert at forensic analysis and the detection of poison, particularly arsenic.

Victorian inquests differed substantially from their twenty-first century version. A contemporary coroner's jury might conclude that a person died as a result of a stabbing, but determining who wielded the knife falls outside the scope of its responsibilities. Nineteenth-century coroner's juries were empowered to identify a suspect, and so inquests could serve as dress rehearsals for the criminal trial to follow. Defendants thus began their criminal trials with the deck stacked against them, since one jury had already judged them guilty. In the Essex poisoning cases, the criminal investigations largely took place as part of the inquests, which extended over several days or weeks and involved many lengthy adjournments while the police gathered additional evidence and the coroners arranged for the appearance of expert witnesses.

Many members of the community testified: the vicar, the workhouse surgeon; the police; family members, including Sarah Chesham's husband, her two older sons and mother- and sister-in-law; neighbours and even Thomas Newport. Alfred Swaine Taylor came up from London to testify that his analysis revealed the presence of a fatal amount of arsenic in the stomachs of both

boys, arsenic they consumed shortly before their deaths. Thomas Newport testified that he had dismissed Joseph in December 1844 after discovering that he had stolen two eggs from him, and Mary Chesham, Sarah's sister-in-law, alleged that Chesham afterwards said of her sons "it would be a good job if it would please God to take them out of the way." Chesham, according to witnesses, tried to obtain arsenic shortly before the two boys died.¹²

At one point the proceedings nearly derailed. The coroner threatened to have Chesham's son John transported for lying to the court and asked the police to take charge of him.¹³ The coroner later alleged that John Chesham's employer, a man named Wisbey, had told him what to say in his testimony. Wisbey was both a friend of Thomas Newport and a member of the coroner's jury. When pressed, Wisbey reluctantly admitted that he and Newport had discussed the case but claimed he could not recall exactly what they said, although arsenic was mentioned. Another member of the jury "expressed his conviction that the conduct of Wisbey had been disgraceful, and that his criminality had been increased by the fact that as a juror he had sworn to

¹² "The Poisonings in Essex," *Times*, September 5, 1846, 7.

¹³ "Poisoning at Clavering," *Daily News*, September 5, 1846, 3. The *Daily News*, the newspaper Charles Dickens founded in 1846 and briefly edited, tersely described John: "Did not know the nature of an oath. Never heard of the Testament and could neither read nor write. Did not know how old he was, but thought he was between 15 and 18." John was in fact younger than Philip and listed as eight years old in the 1841 census, so he would have been approximately thirteen at the time of the inquest. John claimed not to have seen any arsenic in his house or to know what arsenic was, although he described it as white. When challenged about the contradiction, he "prevaricated a good deal, and no further information could be obtained on this point." To most questions put to him he simply responded, "I don't know."

do justice.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the proceedings continued, and on October 23 that the coroner’s jury formally declared its belief that James and Joseph Chesham were willfully murdered and that their mother, Sarah Chesham, was responsible. Sarah Chesham returned to Springfield Gaol to await her trial for their murders.¹⁵

These would not be the only deaths credited to her. Solomon Taylor had died on September 27, and the inquest into his death opened soon afterwards, even as the protracted inquiry into the deaths of the Chesham boys wound on. Neither the local doctor nor Alfred Swaine Taylor would state that poison had killed Solomon, whose death they attributed to “inflammation of the bowels,” but this did not bring an immediate end to the proceedings.¹⁶ The coroner opted to adjourn, and when the inquest resumed two weeks later, Mr. Brook, the surgeon, allowed that “[p]oison administered to a child several times in small doses might produce the appearances he had seen.”¹⁷ The coroner’s jury concluded that Solomon “died from mesenteric disease [an affliction common in children and the result of drinking the unpasteurized milk of tubercular cows] of the glands, but whether from natural causes or otherwise there was not sufficient evidence to show.”¹⁸ Despite this ambiguous verdict, Sarah Chesham would still

¹⁴ “The Poisonings in Essex,” *Times*, September 19, 1846, 3.

¹⁵ “The Essex Poisonings,” *Times*, October 24, 1846, 3.

¹⁶ “The Poisoning at Clavering: Inquest on Another Victim,” *Essex Standard*, October 2, 1846, 2.

¹⁷ “The Alleged Poisonings in Clavering,” *Essex Standard*, October 16, 1846, 2.

¹⁸ “The Essex Poisonings,” *Derby Mercury*, November 4, 1846, 3.

stand trial in connection with his death, on the charge of having administered poison with the intent to murder.

Then the local police arrested Thomas Newport for “having feloniously aided and abetted Sarah Chesham in the administration of poison to her two children,” a charge that must have surprised everyone who followed the investigation, given Lydia Taylor’s implication that he only commissioned Sarah Chesham to poison the baby he was unwilling to support financially and that Chesham accused him of beating one of her sons so badly that it brought on his fatal illness.¹⁹ The arrest stemmed from a letter to him that Chesham dictated from her jail cell.²⁰ When he appeared in the magistrates’ court, Newport admitted to having told Lydia Taylor to “get rid of the child” but “firmly denied being implicated in the poisonings mentioned by the woman Sarah Chesham.” The magistrates committed Newport to stand trial. Unlike Sarah Chesham, he had the funds to post bail. Lydia Taylor, meanwhile, lost her job; her employer, *The Era* reported, dismissed her for attending the court to testify.²¹

¹⁹ According to her mother’s testimony, Lydia appealed to Newport for money on several occasions, and he gave her different sums at different times before regularly paying half-a-crown per week. At some point he refused to continue this arrangement, forcing Lydia to complain to the local Board of Guardians. “Case of Alleged Poisoning at Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, August 21, 1846, 2.

²⁰ “The Clavering Poisonings,” *Essex Standard*, January 22, 1847, 2.

²¹ “The Clavering Poisonings,” *The Era*, January 31, 1847, 7.

The three trials of Sarah Chesham took place consecutively over the course of two days before Lord Chief Justice Thomas Denman. More than fifty prisoners appeared before the courts that March. Various men stood trial for crimes such as arson, sheep stealing, burglary and stabbing, and an unmarried woman named Sarah Bright faced a charge of administering poison to her newborn son.²² Three barristers, Mr. Montague Chambers, Q.C. and his colleagues Mr. Wordsworth and Mr. T. Chambers, presented the Crown's case and two others, Mr. Chadwick Jones, a serjeant-at-law,²³ and a Mr. Charnock, defended Sarah Chesham. The first trial, which considered the alleged willful murder of Joseph Chesham, began promptly at nine o'clock on Thursday, March 11, "long before which hour," noted the *Essex Standard*, "the court was thronged with persons anxious to obtain admission. The most intense interest was manifested in the proceedings and the result."²⁴

On the surface, Sarah Chesham's prospects looked bleak. Stephen Hawkes, the district doctor who officially attributed the boys' deaths to cholera, admitted that he had not actually examined either of them. He first learned of their illness soon after they fell ill, when their father

²² "Essex Lent Assize," *Ipswich Journal*, March 6, 1847, 3, and "The Clavering Poisonings," *Essex Standard*, January 22, 1847, 2.

²³ Now obsolete, serjeant-at-law was for many centuries the highest professional level a British lawyer could attain and a prerequisite for appointment to the Queen's Bench. The privileges the serjeants-at-law once enjoyed, such as the exclusive right to argue cases in the Court of Common Pleas, had begun to erode by the Victorian era, and after 1875 no new serjeants-at-law were appointed.

²⁴ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

came for some medicine for his sons. The next morning he asked Mr. Hawkes to come to the house. “I went immediately, and saw Joseph lying dead on the bed by the side of the room. I saw the prisoner, Sarah Chesham, and told her cholera was an uncommon complaint at the time of year, and it was necessary to examine the body,” Hawkes testified. But he did not examine the body. Instead, based on Richard Chesham’s description of Joseph’s symptoms, he reported the cause of death as cholera. “Did you think yourself justified in certifying that which you did not know, and that an uncommon complaint at that time of year?” asked Lord Chief Justice Denman. “The symptoms were so like that I could not give any other,” Hawkes replied. “But you had no right to have any unless you knew it of your own knowledge,” his lordship noted, probably somewhat irritably, to which Hawkes apparently had nothing to say.²⁵

Mr. Henry Brooks, surgeon, testified to removing the boys’ stomachs and sending them to Professor Graham at University College London. Professor Graham in turn said that when he opened one of the two “bladders,” he immediately saw “the yellow stains of arsenic” and knew that he needed to refer the case to Alfred Swaine Taylor. Taylor testified to finding “a quantity of arsenic,” in Joseph’s stomach, “certainly sufficient to have destroyed life.” The violent vomiting and persistent thirst described in the testimony of other witnesses, he added, “are remarkable symptoms of poisoning by arsenic.” Taylor did not doubt that arsenic, enough to have killed two

²⁵ “Spring Assizes,” *Times*, March 12, 1847, 7.

people, caused Joseph's death. However, no arsenic was found in the Chesham house, and no one could prove that Sarah Chesham ever had arsenic in her possession.²⁶ This was typical of poison cases; as commentators never tired of observing, the administration of poison necessarily involved subterfuge and secrecy and was unlikely to produce hard evidence. The prosecution relied instead on circumstantial evidence, such as opportunity, ability and motive, and the accumulation of testimony about suspicious behaviour, to persuade the jury of the accused's guilt.

To demonstrate just how abruptly the Chesham boys fell ill, the Crown called on Lydia Newman, a neighbour, who recalled that Joseph came to her house between four and five o'clock on the day before his death to get a loaf of bread; "he seemed very well," she said. William Law, who supported his wife and eight children by working as a rat catcher, testified that Sarah Chesham once mentioned to him her wish that he would lay poison to kill the rats in her house, although he did not do so. He believed this exchange took place before her sons died. Margaret Mynott, who helped to support her family by carrying Clavering's mail to and from Newport, testified that approximately two weeks before the boys died, Chesham asked her to buy in Newport two-pence worth of arsenic to kill rats, although Mynott did not make the purchase.²⁷

²⁶ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

²⁷ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

Thomas Deards was, with his wife, the Cheshams' immediate neighbour. A thin wall separated the ground floor rooms, and the Chesham boys slept in a loft directly above the Deards' living room. At the inquest, Thomas Deards testified that the boys' vomit "came through the cracks of board on to my table and the floor."²⁸ He also alleged that Sarah Chesham failed to appreciate the gravity of the situation. He described encountering her in the street that afternoon and asking her: "Mrs. Chesham, are you aware how bad your children are?" He returned home three hours later to find the boys no better and their mother still absent. Later still, while running an errand, he met Chesham again and asked her "if she did not mean to make application for some one to attend to her children as they were very bad." She stated her intention to apply to James Rolph, the churchwarden, for an order for Mr. Hawkes, the district doctor, to attend the case at the parish's expense. Rolph testified, however, that she never came to see him. Deards's wife, Elizabeth, testified that approximately a week before her arrest, Chesham said to her, "I dare say I shall be hanged on Chelmsford gallows, and buried underneath." Mary Pudding, another neighbour, testified that Chesham "said when Tom Newport turned her boy away she didn't know what to do with him." She told Pudding that she said to her son, "You and I are always in somebody's way, and it would be a good job if we were both in the church-yard."²⁹

²⁸ "The Poisonings in Essex," *Times*, September 5, 1846, 7.

²⁹ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

Fortunately for Sarah Chesham, she had competent legal representation. Serjeant Jones's skillful cross-examination of witnesses elicited a number of facts that did much to alter the picture of maternal neglect painted by the Crown. Margaret Mynott, for example, acknowledged that Chesham "appeared a kind mother to her children" and "did not make the least secret of applying to me for poison." Moreover, Chesham needed poison legitimately. "I believe there are rats," said William Law, the rat-catcher. "There is a pond there and I have seen rats around it." Thomas Deards acknowledged that both households were "very much troubled with rats and mice . . . we had to put our victuals out of the way at night for fear the rats should get it." He also admitted that no more than fifteen minutes elapsed between first finding the boys alone and encountering Chesham on her way home, and that she wept over her children when they died. Serjeant Jones got Elizabeth Deards to admit to being "very deaf" and likely to have misheard Chesham's words about the gallows. "I never saw anything to the contrary of her being a good mother," Mary Pudding acknowledged. "When she said she and her child were always in somebody's way she seemed to be in very great grief, like a mother who had lost two children." The vicar, George Brookes, recounted a visit he paid to the Chesham house after the boys died, with the object of "to inquire as to their deaths." "I went to the house without any suspicion of the deaths being unfairly caused," Brookes told Serjeant Jones during cross-examination, "and

came away under the same impression. As pastor of the church I had had frequent opportunities of observing her conduct; she appeared to be all that a mother ought to be.”³⁰

Serjeant Jones addressed the jury in what the reporter for the *Essex Standard* considered “a forcible and eloquent” manner. “He implored them to look to the evidence they had heard given upon oath, and not allow themselves to be biased by any newspaper reports or by the idle, and he feared, in some instances, wicked rumours, which had been circulated, he feared, through almost the whole county of Essex for many months past.” Lord Chief Justice Denman then summed up the case at length. The jury deliberated in the jury box for less than fifteen minutes before acquitting Sarah Chesham of the murder of her son Joseph. “We have no doubt of the child having been poisoned,” the foreman explained, “but we do not see any proof of who administered it.”³¹

Montague Chambers informed the court that the alleged murder of James Chesham was too serious a charge to abandon and asked for a new jury to hear the second case. The Crown presented the same evidence as in the preceding trial, with the addition of one witness, Philip Chesham, Sarah Chesham’s eldest son. Philip Chesham, the *Essex Advertiser* reported, spoke

³⁰ “The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2. The newspaper identified the vicar as M. Brooks, but village history records the vicar as George Brookes. He appears in the 1841 census as George Brooks, living at the vicarage with his wife, Emma and two female servants, Jane Johnston and Mary Button.

³¹ “The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

with “a great impediment” and gave his testimony “most unwillingly.” He claimed to remember little of James’s illness, but he did say that he did not see “anything given to him when he was sick.” “My mother has been a good mother to we [sic],” he said in answer to a question from Serjeant Jones. Proceedings were delayed because Professor Graham had mistakenly believed his work completed after the first trial and left Chelmsford for London. Although the “aid of the electric telegraph was employed to intercept him at Shoreditch,” the court accepted his evidence in the form of a letter he had previously written. After the conclusion of testimony, Serjeant Jones’s address to the jury and the judge’s summation, the jury deliberated for slightly longer than had the jury in the first trial before returning a verdict of not guilty. Chesham returned to Springfield Gaol to await her trial for the alleged poisoning of Solomon Taylor.³²

The third trial began with Serjeant Jones objecting to so many of the potential jurors that the Sheriff ran out of candidates and had to call in a number of local tradesmen. Once the jury was assembled, Montague Chambers called Lydia Taylor to the stand. Her evidence was mostly a repetition of what she had said to the magistrates and the coroner, but she now dated Sarah Chesham’s first visit to her as occurring three weeks after the birth and not two months, and she added a few details. She explained she first met Chesham during her employment at the farm, when Chesham came to see Thomas Newport on two occasions. She described Chesham

³² “The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden,” *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

laughing as Taylor stood at her son's cradle, weeping, while convulsions wracked his tiny body, and finding holes eaten into the fabric of an apron that Chesham borrowed from Taylor and wore on one of her visits. "She has been the death of my child and nobody else," Taylor insisted.³³

Serjeant Jones attacked Lydia Taylor's morals in an attempt to damage her credibility. He wanted to know when Thomas Newport first approached her and when she acquiesced and whether or not she had had sexual relations with any other men, specifically a cowman named William Taylor also employed at the Newport farm. Her vehement denial that she "never had intercourse with him or with any other man" (Thomas Newport excepted) provoked a sensation in court. Jones also asked more relevant questions, however. Chesham's connection with Thomas Newport could be explained by the fact that the cottage in which she lived was one she sublet from the Newports, and she went to the farm to pay her rent. His cross-examination revealed that Taylor herself never sought medical treatment for her son. Solomon was cutting teeth, which might have accounted for some of the symptoms, such as the excessive drooling, that Taylor attributed to poisoning. Taylor's mother called for a doctor once Solomon was left in her care, but his professional opinion was that the only thing wrong with Solomon was that he had been given Godfrey's Cordial, which contained both opium and brandy. Mrs. Taylor kept a bottle of Godfrey's Cordial on a shelf, although when the doctor asked she denied giving any to

³³ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

Solomon. In court she admitted that this was untrue and that she also gave the baby drops of rum.

Illness seems to have afflicted the Taylor house: at one point in his short life, Solomon Taylor suffered from whooping cough, and Mrs. Taylor, who served her community by preparing the recently deceased for burial, also fell ill.³⁴

Of course, Jones's cross-examination was not as powerful as the testimony of Alfred Swaine Taylor, who left no doubt that his examination failed to reveal a trace of poison in Solomon's body. Montague Chambers informed the court that the Crown could "carry the case no further," and Lord Chief Justice Denman agreed. The jury promptly returned a third verdict of not guilty. Thomas Newport, who was supposed to stand trial for his supposed role in the deaths of Joseph and James Chesham, appeared in court and pleaded not guilty to the charge. The court opted to postpone his trial until the next assize. Newport posted a total of £800 in sureties, putting up half and raising the balance from family and friends. Sarah Chesham returned to Clavering for the first time in months, probably believing her ordeal was over.³⁵ For more than a year, the public heard no more about arsenic poisonings in Essex, until a sudden death in the early summer of 1848 brought Mary May to the attention of the authorities.

³⁴ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

³⁵ "The Poisonings at Clavering and Manuden," *Essex Standard*, March 12, 1847, 2.

Mary May, 1848

The small village of Wix lies in eastern Essex, a few miles south of Manningtree, where the self-appointed Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins, conducted the discovery and execution of witches in the middle of the seventeenth century, and a few miles west of the port city of Harwich, once an important naval base and, during the restoration, the constituency of Samuel Pepys, MP. Here in early June 1848 a man named William Constable, generally thought to be in his late forties and better known to everyone in Wix as Spratty Watts, became violently ill after having tea with his half-sister, Mary May; within days he died.

Mary May was approximately twenty-eight. According to the newspapers that would soon briefly make her famous, she was a large and “repulsive-looking” woman. Her husband, Robert, was a labourer, and they had two children. May kept a small shop and also took in lodgers, one of whom was her half-brother, William Constable. He shared his room with another lodger, James Simpson. When May had her brother’s death officially registered, she reported that he died of “natural decline” after an illness that lasted approximately three months. The matter might have ended there had Mary May not gone to the local vicar and asked him to provide her with a certificate stating that her brother, contrary to her earlier representations, had died quite unexpectedly and was thirty-eight years old at the time. She explained that she needed this certificate so that she could receive a small insurance policy she had taken out on her brother’s

life. May had registered her brother in a burial society located in nearby Harwich, naming herself as the beneficiary and entitled to receive approximately £10 in benefits. She spoke quite openly about the money after her brother's death, telling her friends that she planned to buy a horse and cart so that she could work as a higgler, a term for a travelling seller. The suspicious vicar alerted the authorities, the coroner ordered an inquest, and William Constable's body was exhumed.³⁶

The inquest began on June 30 at the Waggon public house (which, like the Fox and Hounds in Clavering, still stands). The proceedings adjourned and resumed a few times as new evidence was gathered and witnesses were called, but this inquest was a much less protracted affair than the inquests in the Chesham case. Alfred Swaine Taylor examined the stomach and reported that he found arsenic "sufficient to destroy two grown persons" and that the "highly inflamed condition of the stomach and intestines, taken together with the presence of arsenic in their coats, proves that poison had been taken *during life*, and satisfactorily accounts for the death of the deceased." John Pratt, the secretary of the New Mourner's Society in Harwich, testified that on May 13, Mary May visited the society's office and paid one shilling and three pence in fees and four pence in premiums to enroll her brother, whom she described as a healthy thirty-five-year-old man who had never had a day's illness. On June 11, the same day that Constable died, Pratt received a note from May stating that her brother had just died "from

³⁶ "Suspected Murder Near Harwich," *Ipswich Journal*, July 8, 1848, 3.

strong inflammation” and seeking payment of the benefit.³⁷ When given the opportunity to speak, Mary May told the coroner: “All I’ve got to say is I never done the crime, and I don’t know who did. I never gave him anything in my life, only what I shouldn’t mind taking myself.” She signed her statement with an X.³⁸ On July 7, the coroner’s jury returned a verdict of willful murder against her, and Mary May was sent to Colchester jail to await her transfer to Chelmsford for trial.

She did not have long to wait. Her trial took place on July 24 before Frederick Pollock, the Lord Chief Baron. Serjeant Jones defended her, assisted by the same T. Chambers who had appeared for the Crown against Sarah Chesham. The Crown’s case against her was circumstantial but compelling. May stood to benefit financially from her brother’s death. She enrolled him in a burial society under false pretenses and without his knowledge and then tried to obtain a fraudulent death certificate to ensure payment of the £10. She misrepresented the nature of his death for the purposes of its official registration, and although she called in a doctor to attend her brother, she did not summon him again when her brother’s condition worsened. After his death, she offered multiple stories to account for the sudden illness. She claimed her brother had drunk from a bottle he found in a field, and that he often used arsenic to get rid of vermin on

³⁷ “Suspected Case of Poisoning at Wix, Near Harwich,” *Essex Standard*, July 7, 1848, 3.

³⁸ ASSI 36/6. Depositions taken at Wix, July 13, 1848, before William Codd, coroner.

the sheep he tended, and then she tried to get friends to testify that Constable told them these stories himself. Finally, she had a history of purchasing “brown powder,” which she spread on bread and butter and used to poison rats. Arsenic, according to the prosecutor, accounted for “at least 90 to 94 percent” of the ingredients in the powder.³⁹

Serjeant Jones suggested that £10 was too “paltry” a sum to motivate a murder. He noted that May was always attentive and affectionate to her half-brother. As for the supposedly secretive enrollment that took May all the way to Harwich so no one would know what she was up to, he noted that May first learned of the burial society from her friend Susannah Forster, the village schoolmistress. Forster had enrolled her own brother in the society and would benefit when he died, and she told May about this and accompanied her to the society’s office. Jones offered two arguments to account for the misrepresentation of Constable’s age: first, he said the burial society would not accept people over the age of forty-five, and second, he suggested that it was entirely likely that neither Constable nor May, as with “numbers of persons in the agricultural districts” knew exactly how old they were and that, in the absence of a birth record, Constable could just as easily have been in his late thirties as his late forties. Finally, Jones blamed May’s self-incriminating statements and conduct on a policeman who, he said, interviewed May “under the mask of friendship.” “I know that this unhappy and illiterate woman

³⁹ “The Poisoning at Wix,” *Essex Standard*, July 28, 1848, 5.

may in the fangs of a policeman have made statements which appear to brighter intellects confused and contradictory,” Jones argued. But he could not counter the weight of the Crown’s case. The jury deliberated for just twenty minutes before finding her guilty.⁴⁰

The Lord Chief Baron asked Mary May if she had anything to say to excuse herself from a death sentence, to which she responded, “I did not do it; I am innocent.”⁴¹ He then placed a black cap on his head and urged May to make her peace with God. “The sentence of the court upon you,” he said, “is that you be taken from hence to the place of execution, where you shall be hanged by the neck until you be dead, [and] that your body shall afterwards be buried within the precincts of the prison in which you shall be confined after this. And may the Lord God Almighty have mercy upon your soul.”⁴² While in prison awaiting her execution, May reportedly refused food until hunger got the better of her. *The Times* described her as eating regularly, sleeping soundly, “sullenly denying her guilt, and treating her fate as a matter of indifference.” Her solicitors and opponents of capital punishment appealed to Sir George Grey, the Home Secretary, to commute her death sentence, but on Monday, August 14, Mary May was hanged in front of a large crowd assembled outside the prison. She “moaned dreadfully” while the hangman, William Calcraft, “completed the arrangements” but “being a portly woman she died

⁴⁰ “The Poisoning at Wix,” *Essex Standard*, July 28, 1848, 5.

⁴¹ “Essex Assizes. Sentence on Mary May,” *Ipswich Journal*, July 29, 1848, 3.

⁴² “The Poisoning at Wix,” *Essex Standard*, July 28, 1848, 5.

with a slight struggle.” Her execution marked the first at Chelmsford in ten years, and the first hanging of a woman in more than forty.⁴³

The story did not end here, however. As with Sarah Chesham, one accusation against Mary May gave rise to another. She had been married once before, to a man who died after an illness that now suddenly seemed highly suspicious, and had buried several children, although no one seemed to know exactly how many. Some newspapers claimed sixteen or fourteen, others placed the number at nine, one wrote that fourteen of her children were deceased but only one or two had died “rather suddenly.”⁴⁴ The press widely reported the imminent exhumation of their bodies, and even optimistically (or naïvely) predicted that this was “expected to appease the excitement in the district.”⁴⁵ But those exhumations never took place.⁴⁶ Instead, the focus shifted to yet another small Essex village and a woman named Hannah Southgate.

⁴³ “Execution,” *Times*, August 15, 1848, 5.

⁴⁴ “Poisoning for Burial Fees,” *Caledonian Mercury*, July 13, 1848, 2. The *Essex Standard* reported that fourteen of May’s sixteen children had died, “one or two of the latest deaths (about six years ago), as also that of her first husband, took place rather suddenly.” “Suspected Case of Poisoning at Wix,” *Essex Standard*, July 7, 1848, 3. Another paper claimed that May had had sixteen children, fifteen of whom had died, although the article bore the headline, “Poisoning for Burial Fees. Suspicious Death of Fourteen Children,” *Manchester Times and Gazette*, July 15, 1848, 6. Still another paper used the same headline, but in the article itself claimed that May had had ten children and lost nine of them. “Poisoning for Burial Fees. Suspicious Death of Fourteen Children,” *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, July 9, 1848, 7.

⁴⁵ “Poisoning for Burial Fees. Suspicious Death of Fourteen Children,” *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, July 9, 1848, 7.

⁴⁶ Had these allegations emerged after May’s conviction for William Constable’s murder, the authorities might understandably have decided not to pursue an investigation, given that she would soon hang. But at this point no one

Hannah Southgate, 1848-1849

Precisely how Hannah Southgate and her deceased first husband, Thomas Ham, came to the attention of the coroner is unclear. The press alleged that Mary May implicated Southgate in Ham's death, but this seems unlikely given that May died denying her guilt and refusing to make any sort of statement. Three other women were the more likely source of the allegations that resulted in the exhumation of Ham's body and the inquest to determine whether or not he died of poison: Phoebe Reed, who lived with the Hams as their domestic servant; Mary Ham, Thomas's mother; and Charlotte Elvish, a wheelwright's wife from Wix, who appeared as a witness in the proceedings against Mary May. All three women testified multiple times at the inquest into Ham's death, which stretched over several days, and Phoebe Reed testified more times than anybody else. Collectively, they told a story that called into question the recorded cause of death and accused Hannah Southgate of thwarting Ham's medical treatment, abusing and committing adultery against him, and consulting with Mary May about troublesome spouses and the best way to get rid of them. Some or all of their accusations came to the attention of the authorities, and on August 23, 1848, the corpse of Thomas Ham was unearthed.

knew what the outcome of the trial would be, which suggests the authorities conducted a preliminary investigation and concluded that the deaths did not warrant exhumation.

The origins of this particular episode in the Essex poisonings lay in 1847, when Hannah Southgate, then known as Hannah Ham, was living in Tendring, a village located a few miles to the southwest of Wix, with her twenty-eight-year-old first husband.⁴⁷ Like his father before him, Thomas Ham earned his living as a blacksmith; his wife went higgling, selling fowl from a cart and at market days. In the spring of 1846, the couple hired a young woman named Phoebe Reed as a live-in servant. In March 1847, Thomas Ham began complaining of digestive problems. He consulted a local doctor, David Manthorpe, who treated him for the remainder of his life. Ham woke on the morning of April 25 feeling unwell. He ate breakfast and remained in bed all day. On the second day of illness, Dr. Manthorpe attended him. “He complained of great difficulty in swallowing,” Dr. Manthorpe later testified. “I do not recollect whether he complained of sickness [vomiting], but he did of his throat I was informed that he had brought up a quantity of blood, and from the great exhaustion in which I found him I concluded he had ruptured a blood vessel”. Ham’s condition worsened that night, and early on the morning of April 27 he died. His wife called Mary Symonds, a neighbour, to prepare his body for burial. “I observed nothing unusual in the appearance of the body, but blood issued from his mouth,” Symonds later

⁴⁷ For clarity, I refer to her throughout this account as Hannah Southgate, as that is the name under which she was charged and tried.

recalled.⁴⁸ The next Sunday, exactly one week from the start of his final illness, Ham was buried in the Tendring churchyard.

Phoebe Reed told a very different story about Thomas Ham's fatal illness. She said that Hannah Southgate gave her a glass of port and asked her to take it up to Ham. Reed watched him empty the glass. Half an hour later, he began vomiting. Soon he also complained of excessive thirst. He vomited through the rest of the day and the night, and the next morning asked Reed to get the doctor; Hannah Southgate said she would do it herself. Reed testified that Southgate asked her husband if she should tell the doctor that he was feeling better, to which the vomiting man allegedly replied, "No, tell him I'm worse." By the late afternoon, the doctor still had not come, and although Hannah Southgate attempted to dissuade her from bothering him, Reed insisted on going herself. She claimed that when she told Dr. Manthorpe just how ill her master was, he expressed surprise. He had seen Ham's wife earlier that day, Reed reported him saying, and she had said her husband was much better. Dr. Manthorpe would later testify that he had no recollection of telling Phoebe Reed this or having any such conversation with Hannah Southgate that day. When Thomas Ham died, Reed said, his widow said, "Well, poor fellow, he's gone, and

⁴⁸ "Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix," *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

I'm glad of it, for we never lived happy together, as I never liked him. I hated him, and I wish he'd died before."⁴⁹

Thomas Ham's parents, William and Mary Ham, lived in Wix. Mary Ham testified that she last saw her son alive on April 25. He complained to her "of great pain in his stomach," "sickness," and "feeling thirsty." He retched frequently in her presence but did not actually vomit. Mary Ham wanted to spend the night with her son and daughter-in-law, but Hannah Southgate "did not wish me to stop" so Mrs. Ham returned to Wix, asking her daughter-in-law to promise to send word if Thomas Ham's condition worsened. "[S]he said she would," Mrs. Ham testified, "but she sent me no message whatever, and I did not see him alive." Mary Ham described her son as a "miserable man" during his marriage. "[H]e has frequently told me that his wife treated him very ill," she said. "I once saw her beat [him] with the handle of a whip." According to Mary Ham, Hannah Southgate told her "she wished she could get rid of him, for he had no work to do" and was "more trouble than he was worth." Charlotte Elvish testified to having witnessed frequent quarrels between the couple. Southgate, she said, "told me several times that if her husband did not die she would poison him." Phoebe Reed claimed that she slept with Hannah Southgate almost every night, as she could not bear to be with her husband. Jane Harvey, who lived next door to the Hams, said "I have often heard shrieks of murder in the house

⁴⁹ "Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix," *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

of Mrs. Ham when she has been quarrelling with her late husband. I have heard her say that if Ham did not die soon she would kill him.”⁵⁰

Witnesses also testified to Hannah Southgate’s promiscuous behaviour. Even before Thomas Ham’s burial, Phoebe Reed said, his widow announced her intention to marry John Southgate, a farmer who lived in Wix. Mary Ham testified to hearing her daughter-in-law tell Thomas Ham that “she liked John Southgate’s little finger better than she did his whole body . . . and she would have him,”⁵¹ and Charlotte Elvish claimed to have heard similar statements. John Peck, a parish constable who boarded with John Southgate in Wix, testified that Hannah Southgate’s relationship with the man who would become her second husband had developed at least four years before Thomas Ham’s death. “During her [first] husband’s lifetime I have known the prisoner to stay out all night with John Southgate,” he said.⁵² Within a week of Thomas Ham’s death, according to Phoebe Reed, his widow even slept in his bed with an unnamed man, who could not have been John Southgate, as he was in London at the time.⁵³ Nor was Ham likely to have been Hannah Southgate’s only victim: Phoebe Reed noted that she had had six children by her first husband, only one of whom, a little girl of seven, still lived.⁵⁴ “Mrs. Southgate’s six

⁵⁰ “Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

⁵¹ “Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

⁵² “The Poisoning Case at Tendring,” *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

⁵³ “Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

⁵⁴ “The Poisoning Case at Tendring,” *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

children died unaccountably,” the press duly reported, “the neighbours supposing that arsenic had been administered to them.”⁵⁵

The coroner also heard from Alfred Swaine Taylor, who examined Ham’s stomach and found a fatal amount of arsenic, mixed with glass and sand, in the intestines. After the first day of testimony, Hannah Southgate prudently retained a solicitor, J. H. Church, who questioned witnesses so rigorously that the coroner finally asked him “to limit his interrogations as much as possible, as they were not met to try the prisoner.”⁵⁶ Church floated a novel theory to account for the presence of arsenic, one with ominous implications for the other bodies interred in Tendring churchyard. “In a churchyard where there are several graves adjoining,” he asked Professor Taylor, “is it not possible for the arsenic to pass from one body to another?” His question provoked much laughter from the many observers crowding the room. “I have never met with such a case,” Professor Taylor replied. “The arsenic was thoroughly embedded in the food taken by the deceased.”⁵⁷

The Hams, according to their neighbour Jane Harvey, kept arsenic. “I have frequently seen arsenic spread on bread and butter in the prisoner’s house,” Harvey testified. “I know it to

⁵⁵ “The Poisoning in North Essex,” *The Satirist*, September 16, 1848, 11.

⁵⁶ “The Poisoning Case at Tendring,” *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

⁵⁷ “Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

have been arsenic, because she [Hannah Southgate] told me so.”⁵⁸ Phoebe Reed had already testified that, the day after Thomas Ham’s funeral, Mary May came to dine with Hannah Southgate and said, “Well, it’s a good thing Tommy’s dead,” to which his widow replied, “Yes, it is a good job for I always hated him”.⁵⁹ Charlotte Elvish returned to the witness stand to testify to witnessing a conversation in which Hannah Southgate complained to Mary May about her husband. “Mrs. May said, ‘If he was my husband I would give him a pill,’ and Mrs. Ham replied, ‘Yes, I’ll be —— if I don’t give him a dose one of these days.’ I have frequently heard Mrs. Ham say that she would poison her husband if he did not soon die,” Elvish told the coroner.⁶⁰ The coroner’s jury, not surprisingly, concluded that Hannah Southgate willfully murdered Thomas Ham. The following morning, she was taken to Chelmsford, where she spent six months in jail, from early September until early March, waiting for the next Courts of Assize to convene.

During the long interval between Thomas Ham’s inquest and Hannah Southgate’s trial, the poison investigation shifted to other gravesites in other villages. The press had already informed the public that Hannah Southgate’s deceased children had become the subject of renewed interest. Now newspapers publicized suspicious deaths involving the husbands and children of other women who had known Southgate and May. “[T]he system of poisoning has

⁵⁸ “The Poisoning Case at Tendring. Adjourned Inquest,” *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

⁵⁹ ASSI 36/6, deposition of Phoebe Reed taken August 29, 1848.

⁶⁰ “The Poisoning Case at Tendring. Adjourned Inquest,” *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

been carried on to a much larger extent than originally supposed,” *The Times* reported. A man named Brudger died after becoming violently ill. Another, Nathaniel Button, “was well until the day before his death,” when he was “seized with sudden illness after partaking of some food which had been prepared for him by his wife.” Another case concerned a man named Palmer, who died “in the most frightful agony” after a sudden illness soon after eating his wife’s cooking; she promptly decamped with her “paramour.” Even Phoebe Reed, the principal witness against Hannah Southgate, became a suspect after she admitted during her testimony that she had had six children, five of whom, like Southgate’s, had died.⁶¹

Hannah Southgate spent six months in jail, from early September until early March, waiting for the next Courts of Assize to convene. At trial, Phoebe Reed served as the principal witness and reiterated her testimony about the Hams’ unhappy marriage, Hannah Southgate’s

⁶¹ The first inquest to take place investigated the death of Nathaniel Button, a sixty-year-old farm labourer who lived in Ramsey, a village located between Wix and Harwich, with his wife, Mary Elizabeth. When he suddenly became ill, his wife appeared unconcerned and dismissed the neighbours’ recommendations that she call a doctor. One witness, Eliza Crisp, testified that she had heard Button say “he would never drink anything that his wife had to do with, as he was afraid of being poisoned”. Alfred Swaine Taylor reported that he found no poison in the remains of Nathaniel Button, although he noted that it was possible that in the four years that had elapsed between Button’s death and his disinterment, any arsenic in his system had vanished. The symptoms the “non-professional witnesses” described were certainly highly suggestive of arsenic poisoning, he said, but it was also possible that they were the result of cholera. The jury concluded that Button died from sickness and diarrhea, but what caused this condition “there was no evidence to shew.” “The Tendring Hundred Poisonings: Suspected Case at Ramsey,” *Essex Standard*, September 22, 1848, 2; “The Essex Poisonings,” *Ipswich Journal*, September 23, 1848, 4; “The Late Suspected Poisonings in Tendring Hundred,” *Essex Standard*, October 6, 1848, 3; “The Late Suspected Poisonings in Tendring Hundred,” *Essex Standard*, October 13, 1848, 3.

repeated threats to murder Thomas Ham and her promiscuous behaviour. But her testimony was much less assertive than it had been at the inquest. “I can’t recollect,” “I can’t say,” and “I don’t know,” peppered her testimony, always in relation to her evidence about what and when Ham ate and drank and the timing of his bouts of vomiting. William Ballantine, who would attain the rank of serjeant-at-law in 1856 and was building a reputation as a skilled cross-examiner, defended Hannah Southgate. “[T]here had been much evidence not strictly connected with the case,” Ballantine argued, evidence “calculated to create a prejudice against the prisoner.” He asked the jurors to ignore “the rumours afloat” and focus on “the evidence alone”. Ballantine did not doubt that the Hams lived together unhappily, but he urged the jury not to put too much weight on the things they said to each other during drunken arguments. He further argued that, in a house where arsenic was routinely spread on bread and butter and left out to poison rats, it was entirely possible for Ham to ingest the poison accidentally.⁶²

Ballantine attacked the credibility of the principal witnesses for the prosecution and hinted at a conspiracy among them to revenge themselves on Southgate for various slights and offences. Under cross-examination, Charlotte Elvish acknowledged that she had once been charged with the theft of potatoes, that her sister had had “a fall out” with Hannah Southgate, and that Phoebe Reed had been staying in Elvish’s house since leaving Southgate’s employment.

⁶² “Essex Lent Assize,” *Essex Standard*, March 9, 1849, 2.

Eliza Crisp, who had not appeared at Thomas Ham's inquest but who had offered evidence highly damaging to Mary Elizabeth Button in the inquest about Nathaniel Button (see footnote 61), testified to some self-incriminating remarks she had heard Hannah Southgate make before Ham's death. Ballantine implied that Crisp's testimony was motivated by money; witnesses were paid small fees to cover the expenses of attending a trial, and Crisp owed money for some chairs.⁶³ Ballantine reserved his strongest attack for Phoebe Reed, calling her testimony "highly improbable and inconsistent". He forced Reed to admit that, even though she had apparently witnessed much immoral behaviour on the part of Southgate and suspected her of murder, she remained in her employment until Southgate dismissed her for theft. He also drew the jury's attention to the fact that Reed's husband had left her five years earlier, that she had since had three illegitimate children with three different men, and that five of her six children had died. During the inquest, the coroner had argued that Reed "might be immoral and yet capable of speaking the truth,"⁶⁴ but the trial jury apparently did not agree. After a trial that stretched over twelve hours, the jury needed just ten minutes to find Hannah Southgate not guilty.

The cases of Brudger and Palmer; the suspected poisonings in the villages such of Mistley, Bradfield, Thorpe and Kirby; and the dead children of Hannah Southgate and Phoebe

⁶³ "Essex Lent Assize," *Essex Standard*, March 9, 1849, 2.

⁶⁴ "Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix," *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

Reed were, like Mary May's first husband and numerous offspring, quietly dropped. The stories about the "horrible system of poisoning"⁶⁵ or "murder to obtain burial fees"⁶⁶ vanished as quickly as they had appeared. But the "epidemic" of "secret poisonings" was not quite over. A little more than a year after the acquittal of Hannah Southgate, Sarah Chesham again became the object of public attention and criminal investigation.

Sarah Chesham, 1850-1851

After the juries in her three trials found her not guilty, Sarah Chesham resumed her life in Clavering. She continued living with her husband and her surviving sons, but the family no longer rented a cottage from the Newports or lived next door to the neighbours who had testified against her. At some point, the family began sharing a house with Chesham's father. Already poor, their circumstances were further reduced in February 1850, when Richard Chesham began suffering from a lingering illness. His wife later described it as beginning with a cough that would not get better.⁶⁷ Later he vomited, experienced chest pains "and could not bear any weight on his body." The relieving officer for the parish visited the Cheshams and then issued authorization for Stephen Hawkes, the local surgeon, to provide treatment. The doctor visited

⁶⁵ "More Poisonings by Arsenic," *The Times*, August 31, 1848, 7.

⁶⁶ "Murder to Obtain Burial Fees," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, July 30, 1848, 5.

⁶⁷ "The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex," *Morning Chronicle*, June 8, 1850, 7.

Richard Chesham several times over the next months.⁶⁸ Towards the end of his life, Richard Chesham spent five days “like a raving madman with a pain in his stomach,” Sarah Chesham testified (unlike the previous inquests that had involved her, she could testify at this one because she had not yet been identified as a suspect). “There was purging but no sickness.” He died in the middle of May. Given Sarah Chesham’s history, the doctor undertook an immediate post-mortem examination and concluded, based on the state of the lungs, that Richard Chesham died from severe tuberculosis. But “suspicious circumstances” were brought to the attention of the coroner, and the intestines and stomach were sent to Alfred Swaine Taylor for his analysis. Taylor found arsenic.⁶⁹ According to a report published in the *Preston Guardian*, “Another son is also said to be dying.”⁷⁰

The inquest began on June 7 and, like the inquest into the deaths of Joseph and James Chesham, took place at the Fox and Hounds Inn in Clavering. Alfred Swaine Taylor testified to finding arsenic in the remains “but in such small quantities as to prevent death.” He employed all his various tests, and “obtained in all only the twenty-fifth of part of a grain.” He did, however, find between twelve and sixteen grains of arsenic in a bag of rice taken from the Chesham home, a bag of rice that Sarah Chesham anxiously tried to keep out of the possession of the police.

⁶⁸ “More Secret Poisonings in Essex,” *Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal*, June 1, 1850, 6.

⁶⁹ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Morning Chronicle*, June 8, 1850, 7.

⁷⁰ “The story of the poisonings at Clavering . . .,” *Preston Guardian*, June 8, 1850, 3.

“[S]he displayed much anxiety lest I should take it away,” the local police superintendent who searched the house testified. “She wished me not to remove it She repeated her desire twice that I should not remove it.”⁷¹ But the amount of arsenic found in Richard Chesham’s body could not have caused his death, which the jury attributed to tuberculosis.

As with the case of Solomon Taylor, however, this did not result in Sarah Chesham’s immediate vindication. The magistrates, the coroner noted, could proceed against her for administering arsenic to her husband. On September 2, the *Essex Standard* reported, police arrested Chesham and took her to the magistrates’ court in Newport. The hearing took place behind closed doors over several days and ended with the magistrates ordering Chesham to stand trial at the March assizes. Four years almost to the day after she stood before Lord Chief Justice Denman, accused of murdering two of her children and attempting to murder Solomon Taylor, she stood before John Campbell, Denman’s successor as Lord Chief Justice, charged with the “capital offence of feloniously administering to Richard Chesham, her husband, a quantity of arsenic, with intent to murder him.”⁷² This time, Sarah Chesham appeared without the benefit of Serjeant Jones’s skills. In fact, she had no legal representation whatsoever.

⁷¹ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Daily News*, June 8, 1850, 6.

⁷² “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *The Times*, March 7, 1851, 6.

Alfred Swaine Taylor testified to finding a small amount of arsenic in the body, too small to prove fatal. He theorized that this might have been the residue of a larger dose taken some time earlier. He also testified to testing the bag of rice brought to him and finding that “every grain of rice was coated with it [arsenic].” The Crown argued that this was how Sarah Chesham administered poison to her husband. When she had appeared as a witness at the inquest, Sarah Chesham insisted that she had not given her husband any rice, but her mother-in-law, also named Sarah Chesham, testified that her daughter-in-law fed her son milk thickened with rice or flour, most recently four days before he died.⁷³ The relieving officer, George Willings, deposed that “for a short time before his death prisoner fed [Richard Chesham] with rice, milk, and flour,” and the police officer who searched the Chesham house and took away the bag of rice testified that Sarah Chesham told him that she had used some of the rice to feed her husband.⁷⁴ Richard Chesham’s mother stated that only his wife fed him. “I never saw anyone else feeding him,” she testified. “[A]ll that he had was fetched by the prisoner, who seemed willing to go, and I remained in the room.” Hannah Phillips, a neighbour and friend, recounted conversations she had had with Sarah Chesham, in which Chesham admitted to poisoning Solomon Taylor, threatened

⁷³ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Morning Chronicle*, June 8, 1850, 7.

⁷⁴ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Daily News*, June 8, 1850, 6.

to poison her husband and offered to “season” a pie for Phillips if she wanted to get rid of her own husband.⁷⁵

Sarah Chesham made what the press deemed “a long rambling statement” in her own defense, a statement that no reporter considered worth reporting verbatim. She insisted upon her innocence and “declared that if her husband had been poisoned, the poison must have been taken in some of the things which people were continually sending to him while he was ill.”⁷⁶ The jury conferred for only a few minutes before finding Chesham guilty of the charge. Lord Chief Justice Campbell put on the black cap, “the awful symbol of death”. He had no doubt, he said in a voice choked with emotion, that Sarah Chesham was “most justly convicted” and that, while she may have “escaped justice” before, she was also guilty of the earlier poisonings. He implored her to spend the time remaining before her execution “in seeking forgiveness for the many crimes that you have committed, for there is no hope of mercy for you in this world.”⁷⁷

On the morning of Tuesday, March 25, 1851, a large crowd assembled in a field to witness the hanging of Sarah Chesham. Domestic servants, farmers, farm labourers, young women with flowers tucked in their bonnets, breastfeeding mothers and elderly matrons jostled together, all vying for the best possible vantage point. Reporters described “smockfroked

⁷⁵ “The Clavering Murder,” *Essex Standard*, March 7, 1851, 6.

⁷⁶ “Essex Lent Assizes,” *Ipswich Journal*, March 8, 1851, 3.

⁷⁷ “The Clavering Murder,” *Essex Standard*, March 7, 1851, 6.

labourers, their highlows and gaiters spattered with mud,” “rustic belles”⁷⁸ in their flowered bonnets, and the shocking language of the vendors selling “edibles of every description” to their hungry customers.⁷⁹ Many in the crowd, reporters wrote, had walked through the night and arrived in Chelmsford “fatigued and careworn,”⁸⁰ “their steps heavy with the number of miles they had traveled,”⁸¹ not only from other parts of Essex but also from Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Londoners had taken advantage of Chelmsford’s close proximity to the capital and traveled up by train.⁸² Precisely how many people gathered is not clear. Estimates ranged from 5,000 to as high as 40,000.⁸³ Undoubtedly a large number people — none of them “respectable,” in the opinion of *The Times*⁸⁴ but well-behaved under the circumstances —

⁷⁸ “The Chelmsford Executions,” *The Times*, March 26, 1851, 6.

⁷⁹ “Execution of Thomas Drory and Sarah Chesham,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, March 30, 1851, p. 6.

⁸⁰ “Execution of Thomas Drory and Sarah Chesham,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, March 30, 1851, p. 6.

⁸¹ “The Chelmsford Executions,” *Times*, March 26, 1851, 6.

⁸² “Execution of Thomas Drory and Sarah Chesham,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, March 30, 1851, 6.

⁸³ “The Essex Murderers,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, March 29, 1851, 2, estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 people watched the execution. The figure of 6,000 appeared in numerous articles — including *The Times*, March 26, 1851, 6; *John Bull*, March 29, 1851, 14; *The Lady’s Newspaper*, March 29, 1851, 6; *Leeds Mercury*, March 29, 1851, 11 — but this likely reflected the fact that these papers published the same report and cannot be assumed to be the most accurate estimate. According to V.A.C. Gattrell, “Audiences of up to 100,000 were occasionally claimed in London, and of 30,000 to 40,000 quite often. Crowds of 3,000-7,000 were standard.” V. A. C. Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 7.

⁸⁴ “The Chelmsford Executions,” *The Times*, March 26, 1851, 6.

assembled “as if Chelmsford were for the day to be converted into some scene of gay festivity.”⁸⁵

The guards of Chelmsford Gaol went to Sarah Chesham’s cell early that morning to prepare her for death. The press reported that Chesham stubbornly refused to cooperate. She refused to leave her cell, and only the guards’ threats to remove her forcibly and carry her to the gallows persuaded her to step into the corridor. Once outside her cell, she required considerable assistance from the female guards in order to walk to where the hangman, William Calcraft, waited for her and a condemned man named Thomas Drory. Drory, the son of a prosperous Essex farmer, was courting the daughter of a local merchant when he impregnated a young woman named Jael Denny, the daughter of one of his father’s employees; he lured her out to a field and strangled her.

Drory, trembling and pale, appeared on the gallows first. The hangman, William Calcraft, placed a hood over his head and secured the rope around his neck, and then Drory endured an agonizing wait of several minutes’ duration. Sarah Chesham arrived with “every muscle of the body quivering with agitation.” Guards had to help Drory and Chesham remain on their feet until the final moment when Calcraft was ready to draw the bolt that would release the trap doors beneath their feet. Calcraft was a notoriously inept hangman, routinely using ropes that were cut

⁸⁵ “Execution of Thomas Drory and Sarah Chesham,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, March 30, 1851, p. 6.

too short to allow prisoners the kind of sudden drop that would quickly break their necks and result in near-instantaneous death. Drory reportedly was the more fortunate of the pair, giving “one convulsive shake of the frame before he ceased to exist,” but Chesham struggled for three long minutes before she eventually choked to death.⁸⁶ The spectacle over, the large crowd dispersed quickly.

⁸⁶ “The Doddington Murder and Clavering Poisonings,” *Essex Standard*, March 28, 1851, 2.

Chapter Two:

Context

“A trial,” the journalist Gitta Sereny observes, “does not happen in a void.”¹ The Victorian public found the accusations made against Sarah Chesham, Mary May and Hannah Southgate believable in large part because the press had already established that an epidemic of arsenic poisonings was stealthily creeping across Britain, and that burial fees motivated many of these poisonings. This chapter examines the context in which the Essex poisonings emerged and became the focus of national attention. It addresses, firstly, the issue of arsenic poisonings, briefly describing a series of highly publicized trials that encouraged the belief that this crime was a growing social problem before arguing that important developments in toxicology in the late 1830s and early 1840s had more to do with the seeming increase in poisonings and that the emphasis on criminal poisonings obscured the fact that accidental poisonings were also causing deaths. The second part of this chapter is devoted to the allegation that burial societies were encouraging the poor to commit murder. The *Daily News* lamented the “numerous murders

¹ Gitta Sereny, *Cries Unheard: Why Children Kill: The Story of Mary Bell* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 74.

committed from the most sordid motives,” namely the “inducement” of “burial money”.² “In the rural districts where arsenic has been so freely and fatally distributed,” wrote the *Caledonian Mercury*, “the burial club system has been in full operation,” encouraging parents “devoid of conscience and intelligence” to “traffic in the lives of their children”.³ Despite many confident assertions that this was a problem in need of urgent government intervention, burial fees played a role in very few criminal cases. In terms of the Essex poisonings, although the press informed readers that “paltry allowance from burial clubs” motivated all the poisonings, only Mary May’s case involved burial fees.⁴ The Essex poisonings emerged and became the focus of national attention not because significant numbers of women were conspiring together to commit poison crimes, I argue, but because the public *believed* that poisoning was an increasingly common crime and working-class women were prone to commit murder for money.

Arsenic Poisonings

“[S]ecret poisoning,” one physician wrote in a letter the *Morning Post*, “is increasing to a fearful extent in this kingdom, and the practice is now become as common as it is disgraceful to

² “It cannot have escaped the attention of our readers . . .,” *Daily News*, July 25, 1848, 2.

³ “Burial Clubs,” *Caledonian Mercury*, September 28, 1848, 1.

⁴ “The Essex Murderers. Execution of Thomas Drory and Sarah Chesham,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, March 29, 1851, 2.

the country and age we live in”.⁵ “The insidious and appalling offence of poisoning seems to be growing more and more common every year,” the *Daily News* editorialized.⁶ The press speculated that the “many cases” that “jostled each other in the columns of the newspapers” represented only a sample of a “multitude” of undetected crime; one paper repudiated the notion that this was an “alarmist” suggestion.⁷ The *London Medical Gazette* published a series of editorials about this “great moral evil” under the umbrella title “On the Increase of Secret Poisonings in This Country”.⁸

Devoted readers of the Victorian press could hardly be blamed for believing that poison murders were on the rise, given the amount of space dedicated to coverage of poison trials. The first highly publicized arsenic poisoning of the nineteenth century occurred in 1815, when Eliza Fenning, a young domestic servant, was hanged for the attempted murder of her employers, who became ill after eating dumplings that turned out to contain arsenic; that the dumpling also poisoned Fenning did nothing to exculpate her in the eyes of the court. Then in 1835, Mary Ann Burdock was hanged for the arsenic poisoning of an elderly woman who was her lodger.⁹ The

⁵ “Sale of Arsenic,” *Morning Post*, July 28, 1849, 3

⁶ “There are two classes of remedies applicable to social disorders. . .,” *Daily News*, August 10, 1847, 1.

⁷ “Some horrid fascination . . .,” *Daily News*, September 14, 1847, 2.

⁸ “On the Increase of Secret Poisonings in This Country,” *London Medical Gazette*, January 15, 1847, 105.

⁹ “Bristol Assizes,” *Bristol Mercury*, April 11, 1835, 2. A week later, the *Bristol Mercury* devoted the entire front page and most of the last page to its coverage of the Burdock trial. “Trial of Mary Ann Burdock,” April 18, 1835, 1 and 4.

first association of burial societies with poison occurred five years later, when Mary Ann Sandys, the four-year-old daughter of Irish immigrant parents so impoverished that they lived in a cellar, died after a short illness. Like the sister who had predeceased her sometime earlier, Mary Ann belonged to a burial club. This immediately cast suspicion on her parents. Her mother, Ann, was charged with their murders; her father, Robert, was charged with aiding and abetting his wife. The suspicions about Robert and Ann Sandys quickly spread to Robert's brother George and his wife, Honor, who had lost a daughter to measles. George and Honor Sandys were charged with aiding and abetting Ann Sandys in the murders of her daughters, and Honor Sandys was also charged with having murdered her daughter, Catherine.

The actual criminal trials did not take place until the summer of 1841, when ultimately only Robert Sandys was convicted of having aided the murder of Elizabeth, a verdict which must have demanded some mental gymnastics on the part of the jury, since the tests for poison on the girls' bodies failed to produce proof that they had ingested arsenic in sufficient quantity to cause their deaths, and no one was convicted of Elizabeth's murder. The charges against George and Honor Sandys were quietly dropped. Robert Sandys avoided the death penalty in favour of transportation to a penal colony. Ann Sandys soon found herself back in court, charged with neglecting her children after she failed to remove them from the workhouse at the conclusion of

her criminal trial, and sentenced to serve one month's hard labour.¹⁰ "Despite an entire lack of evidence that any child had been poisoned, much less intentionally killed, this was the case that convinced much of the population that scores — hundreds — thousands — of the poor routinely murdered their children for cash," writes Judith Flanders.¹¹

Two years later, in 1843, the case of Sarah Dazley elaborated on the fears that the Sandys trial triggered, presenting what might have been the first female serial poisoner of the Victorian age. Newspapers reported that Dazley was widely believed to have poisoned her first husband, her first-born son and then her second husband. Dazley was convicted and hanged.¹² In April 1843, Elizabeth Eccles faced accusations of having poisoned her stepson and two of her daughters. Newspaper reports hinted ominously that Eccles once had a "large family, all of whom were dead."¹³ She raised local suspicions when she applied to her stepson's employer for money to defray funeral expenses not only for him but also for one her daughters. Convicted of his murder, Eccles went to the gallows. Eliza Joyce first stood trial in 1843, accused of the

¹⁰ This account of the Sandys case is based on a number of newspaper articles, including "Suspected Cases of Poisoning Children to Obtain Their Burial Money," *The Standard*, October 23, 1840, 4; "Deaths Through Poison," *Manchester Times and Gazette*, October 24, 1840, 3; "Horrible Charge of Poisoning," *Essex Standard*, August 6, 1841, 3; "At the Stockport Police Court . . .," *The Standard*, September 6, 1841, 3.

¹¹ Flanders, *Invention of Murder*, 230.

¹² Flanders, *Invention of Murder*, 236.

¹³ "Appalling Murders — A Monster," *Freeman's Journal*, April 8, 1843, 1. Other articles used for this account include "Trial of Betty Eccles, for the Murder of Her Children," *Northern Star*, April 15, 1843, 5; "Execution of Betty Eccles and Wilmot Buckley, at Kirkdale," *Morning Chronicle*, May 8, 1843, 6.

arsenic murder of her stepson, William. The jury acquitted her, but her husband and family cast her out. In 1844, while living in a workhouse, Joyce confessed not only to poisoning William but also to the laudanum-induced deaths of her stepdaughter, in October 1841, and her own infant daughter in January 1842.¹⁴

In late 1844, Mary Gallop was executed for the arsenic murder of her father, alleged to have killed him because he did not approve of the apprentice she hoped to marry.¹⁵ In the same year, Sarah Freeman, a young woman who had given birth to a number of short-lived illegitimate children, found herself suspected of having murdered her husband, her mother, her brother and at least one of her children.¹⁶ Her husband, one newspaper reported, belonged to a burial club.¹⁷ Even as these inquests concluded in verdicts of willful murder, the coroner received a letter implicating Freeman in the deaths of five other people, all members of the same family.¹⁸ In the end, the charges in connection with the deaths of her husband and child were abandoned because

¹⁴ “Dreadful Cases of Murder Upon the Prisoner’s Own Confession,” *York Herald*, July 27, 1844, 5.

¹⁵ Flanders, *Invention of Murder*, 238.

¹⁶ This account is based on a number of newspaper articles, including “Extraordinary Inquest and Committal for Murder,” *Morning Chronicle*, January 13, 1845, 7; “Allegations of Murder by a Woman of Her Husband, Children, Mother and Brother,” *Trewman’s Exeter’s Flying Post*, January 16, 1845, 4; “Horrible Murders by a Woman of Her Husband, Mother, Brother, and Daughter,” *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper*, January 19, 1845, 10.

¹⁷ “Allegations of Murder by a Woman of Her Husband, Children, Mother and Brother,” *Trewman’s Exeter’s Flying Post*, January 16, 1845, 4

¹⁸ “The Shapwick Murders: Two Other Verdicts of Wilful Murder,” *Morning Chronicle*, January 21, 1845, 6.

of insufficient evidence, and the charge of having murdered her mother was not pursued once she was convicted of the murder of her brother and sentenced to death.¹⁹

In May 1846, allegations of multiple arsenic poisonings in a single family over an extended period of time rocked Happisburgh (*The Times* liked to refer to the village as Haisborough, which more clearly indicates the name's pronunciation), a small village on the Norfolk coast.²⁰ Suspicion fell on an elderly man, Jonathan Balls. Between 1843 and 1846, Balls allegedly poisoned not only his invalid wife, Anne Elizabeth, but also four of his grandchildren, one as young as nine weeks. Other members of his family or connected to it in some way became ill but survived. The death of Jonathan Balls himself on April 20, 1846, set the investigative wheels into motion, reportedly after villagers went over the heads of indifferent "parochial authorities" and sent "numerous communications" to the coroner, demanding his attention.²¹

Three different surgeons examined the remains of Jonathan Balls, his wife and their most recently deceased granddaughter, Elizabeth Ann.²² One informed the court that the stomachs

¹⁹ "Execution of Sarah Freeman," *Bristol Mercury*, April 26, 1845, 6.

²⁰ In recent years, the discovery of Stone Age tools and artifacts has marked Happisburgh as an important archaeological site.

²¹ "Wholesale Poisoning in Norfolk," *Times*, May 20, 1846, 6.

²² Trying to sort out the alleged victims in this case is complicated by the repeated use of the same first names and the press's frequent errors in reporting. For example, the granddaughter who died and was buried at the same time as Anne Elizabeth Balls was named in reports as Elizabeth Ann Pestle and Anne Elizabeth Pestle. Anne Elizabeth Pestle was also the name of the infant who died in 1843.

“contained arsenic enough to poison the whole parish.”²³ The evidence offered against Jonathan Balls was as follows: several years earlier, he asked a literate neighbour to write a note to a chemist, asking for arsenic to poison some rats (the neighbour refused), and Sarah Kerrison, a “young girl” who lived with the Balls and helped to care for Mrs. Ball, described seeing Balls “drop two or three pinches” of a white powder into a teapot of water. Three days later, his wife was dead. The local vicar, Dr. Birch, described Balls as “a very singular and cunning man,” adding that he “never had a good opinion of him” and had even heard it said that Balls had twice committed arson.²⁴ When the coroner’s jury failed to return a verdict naming Balls as the person responsible for these deaths, the Home Secretary launched a new investigation. The press alleged that Balls was suspected of having killed ten more grandchildren, his two sons, one daughter (her husband had beaten her to death, but she had arsenic in her system), his parents and “many labouring men who were in the habit of mixing greatly in Balls’s society, and visiting him at his house, have died from two or three days’ illness”.²⁵

²³ “Wholesale Poisoning in Norfolk,” *Times*, May 19, 1846, 8.

²⁴ “Wholesale Poisonings in Norfolk,” *Ipswich Journal*, May 23, 1846, 1. *The Times*’s May 20 account of the vicar’s testimony implied that Mr. Birch stated that he knew Balls had been suspected of two other, earlier poisonings. Other reports made it clear that Birch was questioned about arson, not poison, and Birch himself corrected this and other inaccuracies in a letter to the editor of *The Times*. “The Hasborough Poisonings,” *Times*, May 28, 1846, 7.

²⁵ “The Poisoning in Norfolk,” *Times*, June 1, 1846, 3.

The Norfolk poisonings likely had not faded from public memory when Lydia Taylor first voiced her accusations against Sarah Chesham. These poison stories and tales of children murdered for money provided the context that informed both Taylor's immediate assumption that Chesham was poisoning her baby and the response of the authorities and the press. The 1840s undoubtedly experienced an increase in the number of criminal trials for murder by arsenic — between 1840 and 1850, according to Katherine Watson, eighty-seven women and seventy-seven men were charged with murder or attempted murder by poison²⁶ — but did this mean that more people were poisoning? Certainly some observers believed this was the case. The *London Medical Gazette* blamed the growing epidemic of poisonings on popular fiction, while others argued that detailed information about arsenic in the press provided tutorials and inspiration to some who would not otherwise have attempted the crime. Perhaps a small number of people decided to commit their own poisonings after reading press reports, but it is more likely that heightened public awareness of poison and its symptoms cast suspicion on deaths that might previously have been attributed to vaguely defined illnesses, such as cholera. At the same time, recent developments in scientific tests increased the likelihood that toxicologists could detect the presence of arsenic, allowing doctors to diagnose more accurately the cause of death.

²⁶ Katherine Watson, *Poisoned Lives: English Poisoners and their Victims* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 58.

Chemical tests for arsenic had been in use since the 1750s, but the development, in 1836 and 1841 respectively, of two particular chemical tests dramatically affected the investigation of deaths. Prior to their development, doctors and chemists had difficulty proving the presence of arsenic conclusively. For example, in 1833 James Marsh, a chemist faced with the body of an elderly man who died after a sudden and violent illness, tested coffee drunk shortly before death as well as the contents of the stomach. Marsh used a reduction test, which involved heating a sample in a glass tube. If a dark and dully metallic deposit remained after the oxygen was driven off, arsenic was present. When heated, this oxidized and white crystals appeared. The crystals were then dissolved in water and tested in different chemical solutions to see if arsenical compounds were created. Marsh's tests revealed the presence of arsenic in the coffee, but not in the contents of the stomach. The jury acquitted the accused, the man's grandson, who several years later confessed to the murder. Marsh, convinced that the problem lay in the inadequacy of the tests, set about developing a superior method.²⁷

The Marsh test, first introduced in 1836 and then refined in 1837 to give quantitative as well as qualitative results, enabled scientists to test organic matter, such as the contents of stomachs and organ samples, for the presence of arsenic. It could detect as little as one grain of arsenic in four pints of water, and further refinements throughout the century improved on this

²⁷ Katherine Watson, *Poisoned Lives*, 17.

result until as little as one hundred thousandth of a grain could be identified. In 1840, Marie Lafarge, a Frenchwoman duped into an unfortunate marriage, stood accused of the arsenic poisoning of her husband. At first, tests on the dead man's remains failed to produce any arsenic, but when the Marsh test was applied, in an anteroom of the courthouse where the trial was underway, arsenic was found, and Lafarge was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.²⁸

The Marsh test, however, was lengthy and complicated, susceptible to human error and mistaken results. In 1841, a German chemist named Hugo Reinsch introduced a simpler, faster test that used hydrochloric acid solutions to create deposits of metallic arsenic on copper foil. Arsenic would produce white oxide crystals, but the problem was that two of the components of the test — copper and hydrochloric acid — can contain arsenic, which could skew the results. The shortcomings of the Reinsch test became apparent in the case of the physician Thomas Smethurst, prosecuted in 1859 for the arsenic poisoning of his wife. Alfred Swaine Taylor employed the Reinsch test and detected arsenic, but in the interval between the inquest and the trial, Taylor discovered that the copper foil he had used in the test was contaminated with arsenic and had resulted in a false positive.²⁹ Taylor admitted his error at the trial, but the jury convicted

²⁸ Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 10-50.

²⁹ Taylor made a similar error in 1855, in the trial of Joseph Wooler for the murder of his wife, when he tested using acid that was contaminated with arsenic. Tony Ward, "A Mania for Suspicion: Poisoning, Science, and the Law," Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson, eds., *Criminal Conversations: Victorian Crimes, Social Panic, and Moral Outrage* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 140-156.

Smethurst anyway, convinced that this doctor was skilled enough to administer arsenic so that it would leave no trace. The verdict was controversial, with medical journals, the press and the public complaining that, however questionable Smethurst's conduct, the prosecution fell short of proving his guilt. Smethurst's death sentence was commuted, and two months later he received a full pardon.³⁰ Thomas Smethurst's wife was newly pregnant, which may account for the vomiting she suffered, and James C. Whorton notes that recent interpretation of her autopsy reports suggests the possibility that she also suffered from Crohn's disease. When the two are combined, Whorton writes, "there is formed a clinical picture essentially identical to the illness" she suffered prior to death.³¹ Nor was copper the only possible cause of false results. When the Norfolk surgeon who tested for arsenic in the case of Jonathan Balls did not find any poison in the remains of the youngest victim, he tested again (he did not specify which test he used). This time he found the poison, although he had to admit that he had put the remains into the pot where he had also stored the remains of Balls's other alleged victims and may therefore have contaminated his sample.³²

³⁰ Whorton, *Arsenic Century*, 103-108. See also Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 163-170, and Flanders, *Invention of Murder*, 273-280.

³¹ Whorton, *Arsenic Century*, 111-112.

³² "The Poisonings in Norfolk," *The Times*, June 1, 1846, 3.

When toxicologists reported the presence of arsenic, the press and the public typically saw a criminal hand at work. But arsenic was so pervasive in Victorian life that people had myriad opportunities to come into contact with arsenic that did not involve deliberate, secretive poisoning. Arsenic was an inexpensive and readily available product that anyone could purchase. Victorians routinely bought arsenic from the same shops where they bought other household goods, or acquired it from others, and used the poison to kill rats, mice, fleas, lice and bed bugs. In a frequently reproduced *Punch* cartoon from 1849 titled “Fatal Facility; or, Poisons for the Asking,” a ragged child asks an obliging and unquestioning druggist for laudanum and “a pound and a half of arsenic for the rats”.³³ “No town in England can be found in which some well-fed druggist will not for the sum of two-pence, furnish the murderer with the means of destroying one hundred individuals,” railed the *London Medical Gazette*, “providing the retailer’s conscience be previously salved by the old and transparent pretext that the deadly material is required for the purpose of destroying rats or mice!”³⁴ But the poor in particular lived in conditions that made them vulnerable to infestations of vermin and rodents, and they were least able to lose food to rats and mice or to afford the services of professional exterminators.

Although the press mocked women who claimed to have acquired or sought arsenic to deal with

³³ Six years later, in 1855, *Punch* repurposed this cartoon as a comment on a different kind of poisoning, that of food adulteration.

³⁴ “The Suppression of the Crime of Secret Poisoning,” *London Medical Gazette*, February 12, 1847, 286.

a rat problem, this was nonetheless a common solution. One women's magazine, *The Lady's Monthly Museum*, recommended a number of strategies to deal with rats and mice, which, as the magazine noted, "sally forth in search of food, devouring meat, paper, corn, clothes, poultry, game, sheep; and even gnawing the extremities of infants while they sleep". One recipe involved a paste of flour, sugar, water, caraway seeds (for scent) mixed with a "sufficient quantity of arsenic".³⁵ Mary May and Hannah Southgate's method of sprinkling poison onto pieces of bread and butter for the rats to eat may not have been so unlikely an explanation as outside observers assumed.

Arsenic was widely available because it had so many legitimate uses. Farmers used the poison to stave off insect infestations, applying it to the coats of their livestock and even soaking wheat seeds in arsenic to ward off crop-destroying parasites; the press reported one case in which some partridges and pheasants ate the seeds scattered on the ground, with fatal results.³⁶ Candies, candles, cookware, concert tickets, hat decorations, Christmas ornaments and stuffed toys all contained arsenic, notes Whorton, and arsenic preserved the cadavers used for dissection in medical schools.³⁷ Arsenic tinted paint and wallpaper yellow, green or red; it featured in skin products, including medicinal creams rubbed on the skin to destroy cancerous tumours and

³⁵ "Useful Information Respecting Rats," *Lady's Monthly Museum*, March 1802, 19.

³⁶ "On the Use of Arsenic in Agriculture," *The Times*, December 13, 1848, 8.

³⁷ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, x.

cosmetics that promised to whiten complexions or remove unwanted hair. Florence Maybrick, one of the most famous of the “Victorian murderesses,” soaked arsenic-coated flypapers in water to use as a skin treatment. The husband she allegedly poisoned, meanwhile, was a hypochondriac who had a habit of dosing himself with supposedly health-giving tonics which contained arsenic as a key ingredient. As if all these opportunities for contact were not enough, the Victorians unwittingly ate arsenic, because it adulterated and coloured their food.

Stories about accidental poisonings also appeared in the press and contributed to public awareness about the prevalence and dangers of arsenic. In 1846, three children died after eating brightly coloured cake decorations made from a lethal combination of arsenic, copper and lead, and the children, governess and two maids of one Welsh family became ill from a blancmange tinted green with arsenic. Fortunately for them, the blancmange tasted so unpleasant that no one consumed a fatal amount, but the doctor who attended them averred that the blancmange contained enough poison to kill six persons.³⁸ Five members of the Gilton family died of arsenic poisoning after arsenic used in the family’s dye-making business oozed from a drain into the well they used for drinking water. “It must be satisfactory to all parties to know that the arsenic had accidentally communicated with the water,” the coroner said, although the image of arsenic

³⁸ “Poisoning by Twelfth-Cake Ornaments,” *Daily News*, February 12, 1846, 6, “Poison from Eating Blancmange,” *Daily News*, February 14, 1846, 4.

contaminating drinking water sources might have alarmed some readers.³⁹ When four women at a tea party suddenly became ill, the hostess looked inside the teapot and found, “to her surprise,” a packet of Butler’s Fly and Insect Killer, which contained arsenic. She had placed the pesticide in the best teapot to keep it out of the way of her grandchild and completely forgotten to take it out again. A doctor administered a powerful emetic to each woman, and everyone recovered, although the hostess felt “much mental anxiety as being the innocent cause of the accident.”⁴⁰

Stories such as these appeared throughout the century. In 1862 the *British Mothers’ Journal* warned its readers about toxic paint on children’s toys, recounting the death of a little girl who sucked on an artificial grape and of another child poisoned by the green wallpaper that lined its toy cupboard.⁴¹ In 1889, a Wolverhampton family showed signs of poisoning after eating some recently shot pigeons. They recovered, but doctors “surmised that the pigeons had been feeding upon maize that had been dressed with arsenic.”⁴² Perhaps not every tearful servant who claimed to have mistaken arsenic for flour or baking powder was lying.

³⁹ “The Poisoning Case,” *Daily News*, February 26, 1846, 7, and “Melancholy Case of Poisoning: Five Persons Destroyed in One Family,” *Liverpool Mercury*, February 27, 1846, 10.

⁴⁰ “A Tea Party Poisoned,” *Hampshire Advertiser*, September 5, 1846, 3.

⁴¹ “Ornamental Poisons,” *British Mothers’ Journal*, November 1, 1862, 7-9.

⁴² “A Family Poisoned,” *Lancashire Advertiser*, May 18, 1889, 3.

Burial Societies

If arsenic was widely feared to provide the means for murder, then burial clubs allegedly provided the motive. The origins of burial clubs — also often called friendly societies, although some papers alleged that in Essex they were popularly and more ominously known as “death clubs”⁴³ — lay in the decision of workers in a particular trade to make regular small contributions to a common pool of funds that individuals could then draw from in the event of injury, illness or death. In the early nineteenth century, this practice expanded to the creation of burial societies whose members were not necessarily drawn from a single trade. Burial societies were created so that the poor could avoid imposing on the public purse or suffering the indignities of a pauper burial. Some families, determined to bury their dead “properly,” allegedly kept the body in the house until they could scrape together the price of a burial.⁴⁴

Until the alarming “Poisoning for Burial Fees” headlines of the 1840s, burial societies were regarded as good and useful entities. In 1832, one newspaper praised their “signal advantage,” noting that the Unanimous Brotherly Burial Society, established in 1825, had, over seven years, collected more than £1,000 in subscriptions and paid out slightly more than £900. “Thus by the contribution of their mites to this society,” the paper wrote, “the members have, in

⁴³ “Essex,” *Daily News*, September 14, 1848, 3, and “The Late Poisonings in Essex,” *Ipswich Journal*, September 16, 1848, 4.

⁴⁴ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 47.

many instances, avoided the necessity of an application to the parish for funeral expenses — preserved their own independence — and upheld the respectability of their departed friends.”⁴⁵

Four years later, a letter to the editor declared: “There are no institutions, in my opinion, that are calculated to do more good among the industrious classes than Friendly Societies generally.”⁴⁶

By the early 1840s in Preston, Lancashire alone, one burial society member estimated, 25,000 to 30,000 people belonged to burial societies and contributed a total of £4,000 in fees each year, “principally collected in pence and half-pence, from the poorer classes.” The “vast importance” and “utility of these institutions,” this member asserted, “will be readily admitted.”⁴⁷ The New Poor Law supposedly encouraged the working class to form just this kind of “mutualist financial organizations” as a means of self-improvement, argues the literary scholar Josephine McDonagh — at least until burial societies “became the focus of middle-class anxieties about working-class demoralisation and degeneracy.”⁴⁸

Before the end of the decade, stories extolling burial societies as an instrument of public good began to disappear, and newspaper articles, physicians, clergymen and social commentators issued warnings about the ways that unscrupulous people could take advantage of “death clubs.”

⁴⁵ “Burial Societies,” *Preston Chronicle*, August 4, 1832, 3.

⁴⁶ “Friendly Burial Societies,” *Preston Chronicle*, July 16, 1836, 3.

⁴⁷ “Burial Societies,” *Preston Chronicle*, January 16, 1841, 3.

⁴⁸ Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113.

Reports of people who used burial societies for financial gain appeared in the press. Greedy friends of a Stockport woman approaching death allegedly enrolled her in no fewer than eleven different burial societies and successfully collected from ten of them.⁴⁹ Another story reported that in Faversham, dying people were enrolled without their knowledge or consent by “gambling speculators” who profited from their deaths, depleting funds to the detriment of long-term members.⁵⁰ Other criticisms were made: death benefits allowed the poor to spend excessive sums of money on elaborate funerals, or too often a portion of the proceedings was spent in the pub, purchasing rounds of drinks for mourning friends and family.⁵¹ Working-class parents showed no “natural feeling” at their children’s funerals, according to Edwin Chadwick’s 1843 report on the implications for public health of interment practices in towns, and viewed burials not as solemn and mournful occasions but as entertaining diversions.⁵² Some academics perpetuate the negative characterization of burial societies: in his study of nineteenth-century infanticide, Lionel Rose argues that the poor preferred unregulated and cheap burial societies because they “offered a spurious aura of conviviality” — a reference, presumably, to meetings held in pubs and the

⁴⁹ “Profitable Investment,” *Derby Mercury*, July 17, 1844, 1.

⁵⁰ “Speculating on Death,” *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper*, May 23, 1847, 5.

⁵¹ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 61.

⁵² Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 64.

alleged partial payment of benefits in drink — and the lack of pertinent questions when claims were made.⁵³

Other claims were more ominous. One Manchester couple, the parents of many short-lived children, registered the sole survivor in “at least ten burial clubs” and then promptly claimed the benefits when he died of starvation. The parents were prosecuted, according to the witness who told this story to Edwin Chadwick, but the jury chose not to convict, reasoning that it could not be sure if the starvation resulted from lack of food or from disease; the cunning parents collected more than £30 in burial fees.⁵⁴ Chadwick’s report noted that female child mortality was greater than male child mortality, because boys were “likely to be useful to the parents”. Preston’s burial societies refused to enroll sickly children and had a minimum period of membership before benefits could be claimed; thus healthy, insured children were said to die at a higher rate than sickly, uninsured children.⁵⁵ “Cases of the culpable neglect of children who were insured in several clubs had been observed at Preston,” Chadwick wrote.⁵⁶ The role of burial clubs in child murder seemed an important enough aspect of the current condition of England for Thomas Carlyle to refer to it in *Past and Present*. He described a couple convicted of poisoning

⁵³ Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 136.

⁵⁴ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 64-65. I have tried unsuccessfully to corroborate this admittedly alarming story.

⁵⁵ “The Trade in Children to Bury,” *Dundee Courier*, August 16, 1848, 4.

⁵⁶ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 65-66.

their three children “to defraud a ‘burial-society’”.⁵⁷ “The death clubs,” opined one paper, “seem to have been productive of the most disastrous consequences and to have held out a premium to murder which would not otherwise have existed.”⁵⁸ “Parents,” another bluntly asserted, “subscribe to burial societies in order to procure money by murdering their children.”⁵⁹

Much of the criticism of burial societies referred to “parents,” but of course working-class mothers, the parent most directly responsible for the care of children, bore the brunt of the negative rhetoric that characterized them as brutal or, at the very least, indifferent to their children, actively or passively causing their deaths and thinking only of the money they stood to gain. The more likely causes of high infant mortality — poverty and all its attendant consequences — were ignored in favour of an explanation that blamed mothers. “Aye, aye, that child will not live; it is in the burial club” was allegedly a common expression of the “women of the lowest class” in Manchester. “[O]ffer your services to one of the club women in the North, to aid her sick child, and you are at once bowed out of the House,” *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post* claimed.⁶⁰ Chadwick’s report described a Salford woman who acquired membership in a burial

⁵⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 6. Carlyle was likely referring to the case of Robert and Ann Sandys. He grossly misrepresented the facts of the case.

⁵⁸ “The Late Poisonings in Essex: Discovery of More Atrocious Murders,” *Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal*, September 16, 1848, 8.

⁵⁹ “A New Crime,” *Hampshire Advertiser*, February 25, 1844, 5.

⁶⁰ “Burial Clubs,” *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post*, January 25, 1849, 6.

society for herself and her two sons, one of whom was “fargone in consumption.” When asked why she had registered her dying child, she explained that she hoped to get some money to bury him.⁶¹ So polluted was the thinking about burial societies and the people who subscribed to them, that even this woman was deemed suspect, simply because she planned to use burial fees for their intended purpose. It was as though the legitimate reasons that led to the creation of burial societies suddenly no longer existed.

Curiously, however, the sudden scrutiny of burial societies and working-class parenting practices did not translate into the criminal prosecution of large numbers of parents alleged to have committed murder for the sake of burial fees. “If we take the number of infanticides brought before our courts of justices . . . and select from them those that have been members of burial societies,” argued one skeptic, “we shall find the amount very small.”⁶² His was a rare dissenting voice. Burial societies and “secret poisoning” became inextricably linked in the public mind. Concerned citizens submitted letters to the press, excoriating the “baneful operation” of burial clubs, which one writer termed “death lists,” ominously noting that “only a portion of the positive murders resulting from the temptations offered by burial clubs” had come to light. “No

⁶¹ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 66.

⁶² Letter from Thomas Briggs, *Liverpool Mercury*, March 13, 1849, 6.

one can guess how many more victims — infants especially — have been poisoned or otherwise destroyed for the sake of the burial money,” this anonymous reader concluded.⁶³

Very few of the widely publicized poison cases of the 1840s, the cases that supposedly proved that poisoning was becoming a significant social problem, actually involved burial fees, but even crimes in which burial fees did not figure were still attributed to this motive. In 1847, when a woman named Mary Ann Milner was convicted of murdering her sister-in-law and father-in-law, one paper argued that her “only motive” had been “obtaining moneys from burial-clubs,” even though burial fees were never mentioned during her trial.⁶⁴ Similarly, the press created the enduring impression that burial fees provided the motive for the Essex poisonings. “These wholesale assassinations are said to owe their origin to small death clubs,” wrote *The Satirist*. “All the persons guilty of, or suspected of, participation in these murders, belonged to these clubs, and have too easily yielded to the temptation of ‘blood-money.’” According to the *Manchester Times*, “These atrocious crimes are attributable to the fact that the parties made away with were entered as members of burial societies.”⁶⁵ Sarah Chesham, *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* opined, served as an “awful example” to all those women “guilty of the frightful crime of arsenical poisoning, for the purpose of obtaining paltry allowances from burial clubs and other

⁶³ Letter from X, *Times*, January 18, 1849, 3.

⁶⁴ “Execution of Mary Ann Milner,” *Morning Chronicle*, August 2, 1847, 4.

⁶⁵ “The Late Poisonings in Essex,” *Manchester Times*, September 23, 1848, 3.

societies.”⁶⁶ Only Mary May’s trial for the murder of her half-brother involved burial fees. No one provided testimony that linked burial fees to the death of Thomas Ham, and none of Sarah Chesham’s alleged crimes involved burial fees. In fact, the first reference to burial fees in connection with her did not appear until after her execution.

The majority of the allegations in Chadwick’s report were second- or third-hand reports from witnesses re-telling stories they had heard from other people. Numerous judges, vicars, physicians and coroners expressed their certainty that these stories were true, repeating them in court and committee meetings and recounting anecdotes of their own, although the details were usually vague and inaccurate. Chief Baron Pollock, for example, informed a parliamentary committee that “burial societies were fearful sources of crime” and illustrated his point by citing the case of Mary May, who, he said, attempted to murder her son with arsenic and was quickly found to have poisoned her husband and two other children as well. Pollock was obviously conflating May, who had enrolled her half-brother in a burial club, with the case of Sarah Chesham, who most definitely had not. Pollock was “strongly of the opinion that there were many other such cases”.⁶⁷ At one inquest the coroner, learning that the deceased had belonged to three different burial societies, took the opportunity to rail against child enrollment in burial

⁶⁶ “The Essex Murderers,” *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, March 29, 1851, 2.

⁶⁷ “Parliamentary Committee: Committee on Friendly Societies,” *Times*, June 27, 1854, 11.

clubs, even though the inquest examined the death of a forty-two year old man who, the evidence showed, died of natural causes.⁶⁸

For all the concern about burial society deaths, apparently no one in a position to do so attempted to quantify this alleged problem, but the anecdotal evidence suggests that fears were grossly exaggerated. A parliamentary committee in 1854 heard evidence from four judges, two prison governors and a prison chaplain, two coroners, a chief of a police, a registrar of births and deaths and a lawyer who prosecuted a case of child murder, and concluded that “the instances of child murder where the motive has been to obtain money from a burial society are very few (they had evidence of only four convictions in the last 13 years)”.⁶⁹ As George K. Behlmer notes in his own study of the issue, the “assault on burial insurance suffered from a dearth of solid evidence,” “overestimated the ease with which working-class mothers and fathers might be tempted into barbarism,” and defined child cruelty and murder as a class issue even as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children “declared that cruelty was classless.”⁷⁰

Undoubtedly women and men deliberately used arsenic for criminal purposes, but the degree of attention the Victorian press paid to these cases was grossly out of proportion to the actual incidence of this type of crime, which remained statistically insignificant throughout the

⁶⁸ “Inquests,” *Liverpool Mercury*, October 15, 1852, 3.

⁶⁹ “Burial Clubs,” *North Wales Chronicle*, August 12, 1854, 3.

⁷⁰ Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform*, 123 and 136-137.

century. The “more than threefold” increase in poison trials at the Old Bailey between 1839 and 1848 that some scholars cite seems much less dramatic when one realizes that this equated to only twenty-three cases.⁷¹ Between 1750 and 1914, according to Katherine Watson’s research, only 502 people stood accused of poisoning, 237 with arsenic. This averages out to roughly three poison trials per year. To put this in context, consider that between 1830 and 1900, also according to Watson’s figures, approximately 1,000 men and women in England were convicted of killing their spouses; only 40 of these 1,000 cases involved women who used poison to murder their husbands.⁷²

In June 1851, parliament passed legislation to restrict the sale of arsenic. In six sections, An Act to Regulate the Sale of Arsenic required sellers (and the legislation did not restrict who could sell it) to maintain a written record of sales and to sell poison only to customers they knew personally or to people who brought a witness known to the seller. To prevent the possibility that white arsenic could be mistakenly used in the place of flour, baking powder or baking soda, sellers were required to mix in a colouring agent prior to sale, although purchasers who needed undiluted arsenic could purchase it uncoloured as long as they bought ten pounds or more at a

⁷¹ Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, 20. See also Flanders, *Invention of Murder*, 234.

⁷² Watson, *Poisoned Lives*, Table 1, “Poisons Used in English Criminal Cases, 1750-1914,” 33 and 58.

time.⁷³ Some legislators urged for the inclusion of a section prohibiting sales to women, but John Stuart Mill argued against the proposal and prevailed.

Parliament also offered a legislative response to the problem of burial societies. In 1845, the Marquis of Normandy presented to the House of Lords a petition from the people of Exeter urging a “remedy” for the “evil arising from the abuse of burial clubs”.⁷⁴ Five years later, the Marquis of Lansdowne advised his colleagues that the government was considering “the subject of burial clubs and the abominable system of private poisonings to which they gave rise”.⁷⁵ The legislation that government passed in 1850 limited the benefits paid on the death of a child to no more than £3. Neither piece of legislation entirely addressed its respective problem. Neither act would have affected the Essex cases. Mary May, after all, had purchased the poison she likely used from a shop whose owner knew her well and had no reservations about her purchases, and burial society legislation did nothing to protect adults like William Constable. Despite the legislation, poison trials remained a fixture of the Victorian press. Allegations about burial society murders continued for a few more years, vanishing after parliament concluded that burial societies motivated so few crimes that legislation seeking to prevent this was unnecessary, briefly re-emerging at various points throughout the century when crimes in which insurance

⁷³ Sale of Arsenic Regulation Act (short form title), <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1851/13/contents/enacted>.

⁷⁴ Report from the House of Lords, *Glasgow Herald*, February 17, 1845, 1.

⁷⁵ Report from the House of Lords, *Caledonian Mercury*, March 18, 1850, 1.

benefits resulted in murder came to public attention. Lionel Rose notes that the issue of child life insurance ceased to exist after 1908, when legislation prevented people paid to care for children from insuring the lives of their charges. The proportion of parents who purchased life insurance for their children continued to increase in the twentieth century “without attracting any concerned comment.”⁷⁶

This chapter has examined the context in which the Essex cases emerged and flourished. The prominence of poison stories in the Victorian press of the 1840s exaggerated their actual incidence, created a heightened awareness of criminal poisoning and encouraged poison accusations. As a result, the Essex cases occurred at a historical moment when the public was already predisposed to believe that “secret” and “wholesale” poisonings were a very real problem, and poor women were assumed to be the primary agents of this deadly trade. Heightened awareness of poisonings and the association of women with the crime informed Lydia Taylor’s accusations against Sarah Chesham and the responses her allegations generated. The amount of attention paid to poison and the associated belief that children were routinely murdered for burial fees obscured the statistical insignificance of both these crimes, but these two closely linked ideas captured the popular imagination and had terrible implications for the defendants in the Essex cases.

⁷⁶ Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 158.

The next chapter returns to Essex to examine how these ideas shaped and sustained the the belief that large numbers of women were secretly and maliciously poisoning their most intimate relations and even, in the case of Solomon Taylor, perfect strangers. I focus on the most alarming and widely repeated allegations about the Essex cases — that Essex was a place where women routinely murdered their spouses and children without arousing community objections, and that these women organized themselves into a conspiracy of poisoners — and test these allegations against the evidence actually produced in court.

Chapter Three:

The Myth of Sally Arsenic

The press depicted Essex as a place where women conspired together to poison family members and the people condoned murder. But the press did not simply report events as they unfolded. Through substantive errors and fabrications, the press helped to create the story, one that invented, promoted and sustained the myth of a conspiracy of women poisoners. By demonizing the defendants and presuming them guilty from the first accusation, by distorting the facts and giving credence to improbable claims, and by engaging in a large amount of artistic license, the Victorian press created a sensationalized narrative that exacerbated the already highly charged atmosphere in the communities where the investigations played out. The press coverage of the Essex poisonings embodied elements of a moral panic, a term the sociologist Stanley Cohen first introduced in the 1960s to describe those moments when, as he puts it, “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”.

The media, Cohen writes, presents this “threat” in “a stylized and stereotypical fashion,” the “moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking

people,” a putative solution is found, and the threat vanishes.¹ Cohen applied this model to the emergence of the Mods and Rockers. Stories about violent confrontations between these two groups at different seaside resort towns on statutory holidays first appeared in the British press in the early 1960s. Sensational headlines and melodramatic language created the impression that hordes of violent gangs were driving innocent holidaymakers and citizens from the beaches and the streets. Cohen singles out alarming “quotes” attributed to anonymous participants and identifies these as “so patently absurd that they cannot be an accurate transcription of what was actually said”.² Historian Jennifer Davis applies Cohen’s theory to the London garrotting panic of 1862, revealing that the sudden increase in reports of people being violently robbed in the street did not occur until *after* the Victorian press began printing stories about street robberies.³ The narrative the press crafted influenced both the outcome of the Essex cases and events beyond the county borders. In the courtroom, witnesses shaped their testimony to satisfy the needs of a much wider audience than the officials before whom they testified or the communities in which they

¹ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: Granada, 1972), 9.

² Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 43.

³ Jennifer Davis, “The London Garrotting Panic of 1862: A Moral Panic and the Creation of a Criminal Class in Mid-Victorian England,” in V.A.C. Gattrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500* (London: Europa, 1980), 190-213.

lived, and juries returned verdicts that flew in the face of the evidence but met the narrative demands of the story told in the papers' densely printed columns.

According to the press, the bodies subjected to forensic examination represented the tip of an iceberg of poisoned corpses. Poison narratives routinely assumed that poisoners were caught only once their lethal practice was well established. Once a particular individual was suspected in one death, their pool of alleged victims automatically expanded to include anyone else they had contact with who subsequently died. The implications of references to large families "all of whom were dead" were clear to regular readers of crime reports.⁴ These allegations may have originated within the community, but the press enthusiastically disseminated them, even going so far as to present them as proven facts rather than untested assertions. Estimates of the number of children that Mary May reputedly poisoned varied wildly, and the press was never clear whether five or six of Hannah Southgate's children had "dropped off short" after she "white powdered" them.⁵

The idea that Chesham and May murdered far more victims than was officially recognized fed the representation of murder as a rural tradition in Essex. Clavering was a community, the paper alleged, where "[c]rimes of the blackest dye" excited no comment, where

⁴ "Appalling Murders — A Monster," *Freeman's Journal*, April 8, 1843, 1; "The Poisonings in Norfolk," *Times*, June 1, 1846, 3.

⁵ "The Late Poisonings in Essex," *Essex Standard*, September 15, 1848, 2.

the inhabitants had “long ago taken it for granted that the prisoner had poisoned her children, and yet say little more about it than if she had killed her pigs.”⁶ Two years later, when the scene shifted to the village of Wix and Mary May, the press characterized Wix as a place where poisoning was not considered murder or, at the very least, where “murder itself no longer wore any hideous or repulsive aspect in the eyes of the villagers in question.”⁷ In Essex, according to the paper, women “everybody” believed had “made away” with their families were “received into the common society of the village,” even if some might have felt “a little secret dread” in their presence.⁸ “What is to be said of a district where cold-blooded murder meets with all the popular favour which is shown to smuggling in Sussex, or agrarian assassinations in Tipperary?” railed *The Times*.⁹

The evidence, however, fails to support the representation of Essex as particularly prone to “secret poisoning.” Mary May, Hannah Southgate, and Phoebe Reed had each lost several children, but this was tragically common at the time. In the early nineteenth century, infant mortality rates were as high as 30 percent and remained consistent until the first decades of the

⁶ “When we directed public attention . . . ,” *Times*, September 21, 1846, 4.

⁷ “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . . ,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4.

⁸ “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . . ,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4.

⁹ “When we directed public attention . . . ,” *Times*, September 21, 1846, 4.

twentieth century.¹⁰ The high infant and child mortality rates of the 1840s most probably had more to do with the appalling social conditions that made this decade known as the “hungry forties” than with large numbers of women murdering their children. Edwin Chadwick’s public health report cited a family that lost six of seven children. Instead of suspecting this couple of murder, the family doctor attributed the deaths to a different kind of poisoning, an “ill-constructed cesspool” and the toxic air around it. The family found a better place to live and stopped burying its children.¹¹ Some religious leaders, politicians, novelists and social commentators felt that the poor were strangely accepting of their deaths of their children, but perhaps that was because impoverished parents recognized the odds against their children’s survival and did not necessarily mean that parents caused death, or welcomed it. Sarah Chesham’s friends and neighbours testified to her grief at losing her two sons.

Vague speculations about the number of victims and the characterization of Essex as a place that accepted murder together fed the allegation that women in Essex conspired with one another to commit poisonings. The allegation first surfaced in reports of the suspicion that Hannah Southgate had murdered her first husband and named Mary May as the “head and

¹⁰ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182.

¹¹ Chadwick, *Practice of Interment in Towns*, 74.

chief”.¹² The origins of the conspiracy theory lay in testimony that May and Southgate were friends; some newspapers described them as sisters or cousins, although this was not the case.¹³ Recent “unpleasant statements, implicating one or more women” had come to light, reported the *Aberdeen Journal*, and Mary May “urged and advised the commission of the dreadful crimes.”¹⁴ “There is every reason to fear,” *The Times* soon reported, “that husbands and children of a great number of women who were on habits of intimacy with Mrs. May and Mrs. Southgate have been destroyed.”¹⁵ The “mere fact of an intimacy with the woman,” the paper wrote, “is now considered as affording *prima facie* ground of suspicion.”¹⁶

None of these reports connected the east Essex cases with Sarah Chesham, but later, once she stood accused of poisoning her husband, the press returned to the theme of systematic poisoning and identified Chesham as the ring leader. *The Times* claimed that Mary May — who, the paper informed its readers in a demonstration of its tenuous grasp of its own reports, was convicted in 1849 for poisoning her husband — blamed Sarah Chesham for her crime, and once

¹² “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . . ,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4.

¹³ See, for example, “The Poisoning at Wix,” *Ipswich Journal*, August 26, 1848, 3; “Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 3, 1848, 3; “Murders by Poisoning,” *Times*, August 29, 1848, 5.

¹⁴ “Another most atrocious murder . . . ,” *Aberdeen Journal*, September 6, 1848, 3.

¹⁵ “The Late Poisonings in Essex,” *Times*, September 14, 1848, 6.

¹⁶ “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . . ,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4.

this particular allegation appeared other newspapers happily repeated it.¹⁷ Decades later, retrospective articles cast Chesham as the dominant figure in the Essex cases, the woman who “urged” Mary May to commit her own crime. One version claimed that May’s confession promptly “led to the detection and punishment of her tempter,” ignoring the three-year gap between May’s execution and Chesham’s final trial.¹⁸

Little evidence exists to support an “atrocious conspiracy to poison husbands and children” in Essex.¹⁹ The press reported that the wives of Button, Palmer and Brudger were “on terms of intimate friendship” with May and Southgate, but none of the testimony at the coroner’s inquest into Button’s death connected the five women. Undoubtedly May and Southgate knew one another, for they lived in a very small community, but the conversations that Reed and Elvish recounted for the coroner fall short of confirming the existence of an organized system of poisoners. Sarah Chesham, as *The Times* eventually acknowledged, most probably did not have any connection to any poisonings in Wix or Tendring, given that these villages were located on

¹⁷ “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *Times*, March 7, 1851, 6, and “On Thursday last a woman was left for execution . . .,” *Times*, March 8, 1851, 4. See also, “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *John Bull*, March 8, 1851, 16; “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *Ipswich Journal*, March 8, 1851, 3; “A Man Poisoned by His Wife,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, March 9, 1851, 9;

¹⁸ “Poisoners and Poisoning No. II,” *Newcastle Courant*, December 30, 1881, 2. See also “Some Female Poisoners,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 9, 1889, 2, and “Notable Trials for Poisoning,” *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, August 14, 1889, 8.

¹⁹ “The Essex Poisonings,” *Times*, September 21, 1848, 5.

the opposite side of the county from Clavering.²⁰ The supposed source for the connection — the pre-execution confession of Mary May — can safely be discounted as a reliable source, given that at the time of May's hanging, newspapers reported that she died refusing to make any statements at all. Only in the weeks that followed, after Phoebe Reed, Charlotte Elvish and Thomas Ham's mother denounced Hannah Southgate, did the story change and newspapers report that from the condemned cell May made such intriguing remarks as, "If I were disposed to open my lips, it would be giving work to Jack Ketch for a week."²¹ None of these reports mentioned that May blamed Chesham for encouraging her to poison. Only later still, in 1851 when Chesham was tried for administering poison to her husband, did the story change again and the press report that May "admitted . . . that she had been instigated by the prisoner [Chesham] to the commission of the dreadful act for which she suffered."²²

The press was so convinced of May's guilt before her actual trial that it opted not to provide detailed reports of the proceedings against her at the Courts of Assize. Instead, the newspapers reported the opening address of Ryland, the leading prosecutor, verbatim or used this

²⁰ "The Chelmsford Executions," *Times*, March 26, 1851, 6. Interestingly, other newspapers did *not* seize on *The Times*'s admission that Chesham and May were unlikely to have known one another and repeat it.

²¹ "The Suspected Poisonings in Essex," *Manchester Times*, October 3, 1848, 2. Jack Ketch was the name of a seventeenth-century executioner so notorious for his gruesomely incompetent beheadings of Lord Russell and the Duke of Monmouth that his name became a popular reference for subsequent executioners.

²² "A Man Poisoned by His Wife," *Reynolds's Newspaper*, March 9, 1851, 9.

speech as the source of their own synopsis of the case against her. The actual evidence that presumably supported the prosecutor's version of events, the testimony of individual witnesses, was omitted. The *Essex Standard* informed its readers that the testimony of witnesses to support the charge "was similar to that deposed at the inquest," which the paper had "fully reported at the time," the implication being that reporting it again was unnecessary.²³ The *Essex Standard*, at least, balanced its report of Ryland's address with a substantially verbatim account of Serjeant Jones's speech in defense of the accused. Some papers reduced Jones's address to a simple argument that "the circumstances were not incompatible with the prisoner's innocence" and May was "entitled to the benefit of any reasonable doubt they might entertain upon the subject."²⁴ Other papers devoted even less space to May's defense.²⁵

The lack of coverage inhibited public scrutiny of May's trial. Readers simply had to take it on faith that the evidence presented against her proved her guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. My close examination of the reports in this case reveals an intriguing aspect of May's trial that other scholars have not recognized. The prosecutor's opening address referred to some evidence that, if true, was highly damaging to Mary May's protestations of innocence. He described a witness who claimed to have seen May remove a twist of paper from a locked drawer, open it

²³ "The Poisoning at Wix," *Essex Standard*, July 28, 1848, 5.

²⁴ "Poisoning," *The Times*, July 25, 1848, 7, and "Poisoning," *Ipswich Journal*, July 29, 1848, 4.

²⁵ "Murder to Obtain Burial Fees," *The Satirist*, July 29 1848, 3.

and shake its powdery contents into some porter, which she then served to William Constable, who fell ill soon afterwards. The witness who provided this testimony, the prosecutor said, was Mary May's own son. The intriguing thing about this is that none of the coverage of the coroner's inquest referred to this testimony. The lack of detailed coverage of May's trial makes it impossible to determine what was said in that particular courtroom, other than the prosecutor's opening address and the judge's comments. It seems equally incredible that the press would fail to report such damaging evidence at the inquest, and that the prosecutor would describe this incident without calling May's son to testify to it in court. If May's son did not testify against his mother at the trial, then surely Serjeant Jones would have noticed that the prosecutor made a claim highly damaging to his client without substantiation. The matter of this "invisible" witness raises the possibility that the trial Mary May received was no more fair-minded towards her than the newspaper reports of her case.

When Hannah Southgate first came to public attention, the press claimed that Mary May had made a pre-execution confession in which she accused Southgate of fatally poisoning her first husband. The cases of the two women *were* inextricably linked, but not because May made incriminating statements about Southgate and sparked an immediate investigation. Rather, in the days that followed May's execution, rumours ran "rife" in and around Wix.²⁶ The press never

²⁶ "Another Case of Suspected Poisoning in the Neighbourhood of Wix," *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

identified the source of these rumours, but we can reasonably infer that Phoebe Reed and Charlotte Elvish played major roles in motivating the local authorities to investigate the death of Southgate's first husband. Reed, of course, provided the most damaging and voluminous testimony against her former employer, and Elvish had recently testified against Mary May, travelling to Chelmsford to appear at the Courts of Assize.

The rumours about Hannah Southgate likely owed a considerable debt to the highly charged atmosphere that permeated Wix and nearby villages and to reluctance on the part of at least some people in the community to see an end to the public attention. The discovery of a poisoning case typically produced reports of "intense excitement" in the immediate vicinity. The press may have exaggerated the numbers of people who crowded in churchyards to await exhumations and stood for hours outside pubs to hear the outcome of an inquest, but the sheer volume of space devoted to detailed coverage of criminal trials indicates widespread public interest in crime stories and this was inevitably magnified many times over in the place where the alleged crime occurred, particularly when that place was a small rural village unused to finding itself the centre of national attention.

The various statements that Charlotte Elvish and Phoebe Reed offered against Hannah Southgate suggest a need to sustain the highly charged atmosphere. Elvish returned to Wix from her appearance at May's trial boasting that the excitement might not be over. Reed was

demonstrably eager to testify against her former employer and apparently prepared to make as many depositions as the coroner would allow if it would convince the jury to return a verdict naming Southgate as the party responsible for Ham's death. Both women offered multiple statements that embellished their previous testimony or provided slightly different, more sensationalized versions of the same events. At the inquest into the death of William Constable, Elvish testified that she saw Constable vomit some "whitish stuff" into a pot and heard him complain that his stomach "was very bad".²⁷ Elvish's evidence against Mary May was relatively straightforward and, on the face of it, believable. When she returned to Wix and discussed her experience with Hannah and John Southgate, however, she warned John Southgate that "it might not be all over yet,"²⁸ and she soon appeared in the coroner's court offering sensational and damning testimony against Hannah Southgate.

Elvish testified at the coroner's inquest into the death of Thomas Ham on two separate occasions. Not until her second appearance, when the adjourned inquest resumed a week later, did Elvish recount conversations she witnessed in which Mary May told Hannah Southgate "If

²⁷ ASSI 36/6, Depositions taken at Wix, June 13, 1848, before William Codd, coroner. The press reported Elvish as saying that Constable vomited "a light-brown fluid," but this may have been an error resulting from the fact that Elvish's deposition also described May as giving Constable some brown liquid from a green bottle, which may have been the medicine that the surgeon's assistant sent when an order arrived requesting treatment for Constable. "Suspected Case of Poisoning at Wix, Near Harwich: Inquest on the Body," *Essex Standard*, July 7, 1848, 3.

²⁸ "Essex Lent Assize," *Essex Standard*, March 9, 1849, 2.

he was mine I'd soon give him a pill" and Southgate replied, "I will give him a dose some of these days". She also expanded on her earlier testimony, quoting Southgate as saying "she would poison her husband if he did not soon die" and that she "liked John Southgate's little finger better than her husband's whole carcase". She also reported that Southgate tried to convince her (she would later allege that Southgate resorted to bribery) to join forces with her in making a liar out of "old Phoebe". Curiously, until she appeared in the coroner's court, Elvish failed to communicate any of Hannah Southgate's self-incriminating remarks or threats against her husband's life, even after Thomas Ham died so suddenly, and even when a local policeman entered the room just as Southgate begged Elvish not to support Phoebe Reed's allegations.²⁹

Phoebe Reed's testimony was even more problematic. She testified five separate times over three separate sittings of the coroner's court, and each deposition painted a successively blacker picture of Hannah Southgate. In her first deposition, Reed provided testimony about the trajectory of Thomas Ham's illness and the doctor's surprise when Reed told him that Ham's condition had deteriorated. She also described how within days of his death, his widow announced her intention to marry "that young man I like" and claimed that soon after she went to

²⁹ "The Poisoning Case at Tendring: Adjourned Inquest," *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

work for the Hams, Hannah Southgate began talking about how much she hated her husband.

She even heard her tell Ham that some day she would poison him.³⁰

Six days later, Reed provided a second deposition. This time, anxious to maintain her status as the key and primary witness, the only person living in the house with the victim and alleged killer, she added details that echoed what other witnesses had said. For example, the surgeon who treated Ham testified that “great difficulty in swallowing” was one of his complaints. Reed corroborated what the surgeon said and, for the first time, described Ham as inserting a quill down his throat several times in an effort to relieve the sensation of a blockage. She also recounted how Mary May came for dinner the day after Thomas Ham’s funeral, and May and Southgate talked about how happy they were that Ham had died.³¹ After John Crampion, a “pig-jobber” and friend of Thomas Ham, mentioned at the end of his own evidence that he believed Ham “was worth some money” and had “about £30” in his possession in the weeks preceding his death, Reed told the coroner, “I know the deceased to have been worth some money, as I have on more than one occasion seen as much as £16 in gold in his possession, which he kept in a canister under his bed.” Later still, after much back and forth between the coroner, the jury foreman, Hannah Southgate’s solicitor and other witnesses, Reed was recalled

³⁰ “Another Case of Suspected Poisonings in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

³¹ “Another Case of Suspected Poisonings in the Neighbourhood of Wix,” *Essex Standard*, September 1, 1848, 3.

to testify that five of Southgate's six children had died, and that when Reed herself became pregnant, Southgate offered her a pill that would cause a miscarriage. She concluded this, her final statement to the court, with the claim, never previously mentioned by her, that she had heard Thomas Ham say "that he was afraid to take anything from his wife's hands."³²

Other witnesses, of course, testified to the Hams' unhappy marriage, to Hannah Southgate's infidelity, and to her practice of putting arsenic on bread and butter and leaving pieces out for rats to eat, but only Phoebe Reed and Charlotte Elvish offered testimony that linked Hannah Southgate with Mary May and claimed that Southgate repeatedly spoke about her intention to poison her husband. Neither woman could explain why they remained silent about their suspicions that Hannah Southgate had poisoned Thomas Ham from May 1847, when Ham was buried in Tending churchyard, until after Mary May's trial and execution in 1848. Indeed, one wonders why, if Mary May spoke so openly to Hannah Southgate about poisoning long before the death of her own half-brother, no one — not Phoebe Reed, Charlotte Elvish or anyone else — testified to this at May's trial.

The most maligned of the Essex poisoners, both at the time of her trials and in subsequent treatments of these cases, was and is Sarah Chesham. The press used inflammatory language to describe her and cast her as a highly feared figure in her own community, and this has obscured

³² "The Poisoning Case at Tendring: Adjourned Inquest," *Essex Standard*, September 8, 1848, 2.

the lack of evidence to support either the press's representation of her or the charges brought against her. Her conviction and execution in 1851 are taken as proof that she was, indeed, an incorrigible poisoner, the odds of one person being wrongly accused not just once or twice but four times is apparently too unlikely to believe (unless, of course, one looks at witchcraft trials, where the same names could surface year after year). Critical analysis of the evidence, however, suggests that this may well have been what happened to Sarah Chesham.

Long before Sarah Chesham had had her day in court, *The Times* wrote of her as a “reputed poisoner — a woman whose employment was as well known as that of a nurse or a washerwoman,” a woman who would “put any expensive or disagreeable object out of the way” for a price. *The Times* imagined her at work. “She makes her appearance at the abode of her victims, 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.” But even the most vigilant were no match for the determined and experienced poisoner, who “by cunning and contrivance” eventually succeeded in accomplishing her task.³³ *The Times* depicted Chesham as a “noxious animal” often seen “prowling” around the village, a “professed murderess” so “gratuitous” in her “art” that mothers “snatch[ed] their children out of her path” and “locked their children up when she was

³³ “When we directed public attention . . .,” *Times*, September 21, 1846, 4.

seen about the premises.”³⁴ *The Times* even heightened the drama with the claim that when Lydia Taylor and her mother summoned help, Chesham fled and successfully evaded capture for an unspecified period of time, although the paper offered no evidence to corroborate this story.

When she was first accused of poisoning Solomon Taylor and her two sons, however, no court — magistrates, coroner or assize — heard testimony that anyone, other than Lydia Taylor and her mother, knew or believed that Sarah Chesham poisoned people for money or had poisoned her children. Indeed, at the time when Sarah Chesham first came under scrutiny, the press was strangely uninterested in the victims of this allegedly professional poisoner. The only victims credited to her at this stage were two of her sons and Solomon Taylor. If she was well known and accepted as a poisoner in Clavering, where, exactly, were her victims? Almost five years later, writing about her as she awaited execution in 1851, *The Times* credited her and Mary May, now cast in the role of Chesham’s apt pupil, with a dozen or more murders each. *The Times* suggested that Chesham, having escaped the noose in 1847, resumed her lethal profession. “In fact,” the paper concluded ominously, “it is impossible to say what havoc may not have been wrought by a murderess in the full swing of her profession for four years together.”³⁵ Again one wonders whom, other than her husband, Chesham was supposed to have killed in these years.

³⁴ “In the observations which we offered some two years ago . . .,” *Times*, September 22, 1848, 4, and “On Thursday last a woman was left for execution . . .,” *Times*, March 8, 1851, 4.

³⁵ “On Thursday last a woman was left for execution . . .,” *Times*, March 8, 1851, 4.

If Chesham's reputation as a poisoner-for-hire was as well established as the paper alleged, why did Lydia Taylor allow her to have any contact with her baby? Why, if Taylor and her mother believed she had succeeded in giving poison to young Solomon, did they allow her into the house on subsequent visits? Why, if they were suspicious of the food she brought with her, did they throw these items away instead of taking them to the police? Why did they fail to inform anyone in authority of their suspicions until several months had passed?³⁶ Could Chesham really have administered arsenic to a newborn baby in sufficient quantity to cause an immediate reaction, including blistering around the mouth, without causing the violent vomiting and diarrhea that accompany arsenic ingestion?

What was the purpose of Sarah Chesham's visits to Lydia Taylor? At the time of the investigation, the newspapers never quite explicitly stated the theory that Newport hired Chesham to poison Solomon Taylor, thereby freeing him of the ongoing obligation of paying for his illegitimate child's support, but everyone inferred as much, and in 1850 one newspaper falsely reported that Thomas Newport was convicted of "endeavouring to procure the commission of the felony" (in fact Newport was tried for attempting to convince Lydia Taylor

³⁶ As noted above, *The Times* at one point claimed that Taylor and her mother summoned help, but Chesham fled and avoided arrest for an unspecified period of time. No police officer, however, provided any testimony to corroborate this story, and it seems unlikely that a wife and mother could simply disappear for several days or weeks without anyone in her village noticing her absence.

“to use certain drugs to procure abortion” and acquitted).³⁷ Given that Solomon Taylor showed no signs of poisoning, and assuming that Taylor’s description of Chesham speaking badly about Newport during her visits is true, another possible scenario suggests itself. Chesham spoke to many people of her certainty that Newport’s physical mistreatment of one of her sons somehow killed him. When her son’s remains tested positive for arsenic poisoning, she blamed Newport, who used arsenic for farming purposes. The letter to Newport that Chesham dictated while in jail, resulting in his arrest, accused him not of involvement in Solomon Taylor’s death but of causing the death of one of her sons. Perhaps Chesham, angry about the loss of her sons the previous year and already in an adversarial relationship with the man who accused her son of stealing from him and to whom she and her husband paid rent for an inadequate cottage, hoped to cause Newport grief by provoking Taylor, another woman whom Newport had wronged, into escalating her demands for financial support for the baby.

No one disputed the toxicological reports that James and Joseph Chesham died of arsenic poisoning or that arsenic contributed to Richard Chesham’s death. Assuming that none of Alfred Swaine Taylor’s tests resulted in false positives, as later happened in the Smethurst case, how did the arsenic get into their systems? No one proved that Sarah Chesham possessed arsenic. None of

³⁷ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Morning Chronicle*, June 8, 1850, 7, and “Essex Summer Assizes,” *Ipswich Journal*, July 17, 1847, 3.

the many phials and pots that the police removed from the Chesham home in 1846 contained arsenic, and no one proved that Chesham ever obtained the arsenic she tried to purchase — quite openly — to kill rats. The primary witness for the prosecution at Chesham's 1851 trial claimed that Chesham told her that in 1846 she hid the arsenic she used to poison her children and Solomon Taylor in a stump and retrieved the arsenic when she returned to Clavering after her acquittals in 1847, but it seems highly unlikely that anyone could hide arsenic in a stump for several months, find it useable and then save it for several years before using it poison their spouse — or, if such a thing were possible, that they would speak freely on the subject, particularly if they truly had recently gotten away with murder. Chesham's theory that Newport bribed her sons to take poisoned candies is far-fetched (not to mention eerily similar to reports that Chesham wandered the countryside with poisoned lozenges in her pockets, ready to slip into the mouths of unsuspecting children). It was not, however, impossible that the boys accidentally ingested arsenic from Newport's farm. Newport used arsenic on wheat to discourage parasites. James C. Whorton cites a rural physician who noted the dangers to hungry children posed by arsenic-treated wheat scattered on footpaths between fields.³⁸ Could Joseph and James have gleaned some of Newport's wheat or stolen seeds from Newport's barn (Joseph had, after all, been dismissed for stealing eggs) and ingested a fatal amount of arsenic in that way?

³⁸ Whorton, *Arsenic Century*, 317.

Richard Chesham first showed signs of sickness late in 1849, and in February 1850 became ill enough that his wife obtained from the parish an order for medical treatment. At various points he complained of bad coughs, difficulty in breathing, pain in his shoulder and finally acute abdominal pain and nausea. At Sarah Chesham's trial, the doctor who attended Richard Chesham testified that his symptoms "were such as would be the result of the administrations of small doses of irritant poison,"³⁹ but it is worth noting that he said this only *after* Alfred Swaine Taylor reported that the traces of arsenic found in Richard Chesham's body must have been administered to him in tiny amounts over an extended period of time. This doctor must surely have been aware of Sarah Chesham's recent history as well as of the other alleged poisonings in Essex, but he did not conclude during his treatment of Richard Chesham that his symptoms suggested gradual poisoning. Nor did he reach this conclusion during his examination of the body immediately after the death. Rather, he found unmistakable evidence of tuberculosis.⁴⁰

The police and the press made much of Sarah Chesham's anxiety about the bag of rice that the police removed during the investigation of Richard Chesham's death, implying that she

³⁹ "The Poisonings at Clavering," *Daily News*, March 7, 1851, 6.

⁴⁰ "More Secret Poisonings in Essex," *Northern Star and National Trades' Journal*, June 1, 1850, 6.

was eager to keep it out of police hands because this was how she poisoned her husband.⁴¹

Alfred Swaine Taylor testified that the bag contained enough arsenic to kill six people, that “[e]very grain of rice was covered” and “the whole appeared to have been carefully mixed up together so that every part of the rice was poisoned, and the interior of the bag containing the rice was likewise covered with arsenic.”⁴² How likely was it that the rice could contain that much arsenic, be fed to Richard Chesham in the days before his death, and yet fail to leave enough poison in his system for Taylor to conclude definitively that arsenic caused his death? It must also be acknowledged that the test gave results only on the rice left in the bag and did not necessarily prove that the rice that had been consumed had also been covered with arsenic. Perhaps Chesham’s anxiety about the rice was, as she said, simply because it belonged to her father. The Cheshams were clearly living in even further reduced circumstances than they had been in 1846, and the seizure of a bag of rice may have represented a significant loss to the household. Moreover, it seems bizarre that Chesham would add arsenic to rice she knew her father was going to eat, or if she did, that she would fail to get rid of the rice once her husband died. Her recent experiences must have told her that his death would arouse suspicion. Up until the point when she lied at the inquest about whether or not her husband ate any of the rice,

⁴¹ “The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex,” *Daily News*, June 8, 1850, 6; “The Alleged Poisonings in Essex,” *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 12; “Extraordinary Murders by Poisoning at Clavering,” *Times*, September 5, 1850, 5.

⁴² “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *Times*, March 7, 1851, 6.

probably because at this point she was fearful that she would again be charged with murder, she was open with both the doctor and her mother-in-law about feeding milk and rice to her husband.

Unable to prosecute Sarah Chesham for the murder of her husband, the Crown proceeded on the grounds that she had administered arsenic with intent to murder. This was largely a response to the testimony of Hannah Phillips. Newspapers may have considered Hannah Phillips the “most important witness” in Chesham’s trial, but the content and tone of her evidence bears striking similarities to the testimony of Phoebe Reed and Charlotte Elvish. Her allegations that adultery formed part of Chesham’s motive for ridding herself of her husband echoed the evidence against Hannah Southgate, and her stories of Chesham talking about ways and means of disposing of unwanted husbands and urging Phillips, however obliquely, to poison her own, sound eerily like the conversations between Mary May and Hannah Southgate that Reed and Elvish claimed to have heard. Like Elvish and Reed, Phillips did not explain why she failed to report Chesham’s confessions about having poisoned Solomon Taylor and her intention to poison Lydia Taylor, too (a wholly new allegation), or why she did not disclose Chesham’s threats about her husband while he was still alive and she might have spared him the results of eating one of Chesham’s seasoned pies.

Phillips first alleged that Chesham told her she had hidden poison in a stump when she testified at the coroner's inquest in June.⁴³ To the magistrates, Phillips made a second, longer and more damaging deposition. Phillips testified that after Chesham's acquittals in 1847, "[h]er talk was always about her children and Mr. Thomas Newport." Chesham "repeatedly" accused Newport of bribing her sons with "a halfpenny" to take "what he gave them," and said that Newport "sent her to poison Lydia Taylor's child and Lydia Taylor herself" and that "she did poison the child but she had intended to go again to poison the mother, but she had not an opportunity". "These conversations," Phillips asserted, "went on between us for, I should think, twelve months or more."⁴⁴

Chesham also talked about husbands, specifically about Phillips's husband, who apparently had a habit of hitting his wife. "[S]he said she would not live with her husband and if she had such a husband as mine she would not live with him and she would have done with him years ago," Phillips testified. She offered to "season" a pie for Phillips to feed her husband and said that her husband and son "lived chiefly on these meat pies and rice". "I understood her to mean," Phillips said, "that she had seasoned the mince pies as she wanted to season mine".

Phillips claimed that Chesham had not wanted to return to living with her husband when she

⁴³ "The Mysterious Poisonings in Essex," *Morning Chronicle*, June 8, 1850, 7.

⁴⁴ ASSI 36/6, deposition of Hannah Phillips to the magistrates' court, September 10, 1850.

came home from Chelmsford in 1847, “because there was another man she was going to live with.” After Richard Chesham died, she said, his widow came to her house. “She asked me what I had been saying about the poison and she told me not to say anything more about it for that her trouble was great enough,” Phillips said.⁴⁵ After the inquest, Phillips added, she passed Chesham in the street and tauntingly called her “Sally Arsenic.” This has since been represented as a nickname by which Sarah Chesham was widely known, although it surfaced only in Hannah Phillips’s testimony.⁴⁶

Phillips blamed her husband for the different content of her two depositions. Her husband, she said, threatened her. He worked for Thomas Newport’s brother, John, and feared that his wife’s testimony could cost him his job. He warned his wife that if she provided evidence that implicated Thomas Newport, she “should not come home anymore.” Also, Phillips noted, “at the inquest I was not called upon to give all the evidence I have given today.” William Phillips, for his part, denied pressuring or threatening his wife into withholding valuable information. He had no idea, he said, that his wife was “so intimate” with Chesham. He testified

⁴⁵ ASSI 36/6, deposition of Hannah Phillips to the magistrates’ court, September 10, 1850.

⁴⁶ “Poisoning in Essex,” *Times*, September 23, 1850, 2, and “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *Times*, March 7, 1851, 6.

that his wife did not tell him about any of her conversations with Chesham until after the inquest, when he told her that she was “stupid” to have held back incriminating evidence.⁴⁷

By the time the magistrates bound Sarah Chesham over to stand trial at the next assizes on the charge of administering poison to her husband, she finally fit the press’s representation of her. As a shoemaker named John Holgate observed to her, “she had disgraced herself” and “everybody despised her.” Chesham responded with a tearful acknowledgement of her outcast status and denied having killed her husband, whom she called her “only friend”.⁴⁸ Chesham’s lack of support followed her into the courtroom, where this time she stood trial without legal representation, and although “one of the gentlemen at the bar” agreed to “put such questions to the witnesses as she suggested to be material,” this hardly compared to the competent and prepared representation that once benefited her.⁴⁹ Perhaps if Serjeant Chadwick Jones had been present to engage in the kind of skillful cross-examination that led to her acquittals in 1847, the jury’s attention might have been drawn to the inadequacy of the evidence offered against her.

⁴⁷ ASSI 36/6, deposition of William Phillips, September 16, 1850. Within days of giving this evidence, William Phillips returned to make a second statement, in which he claimed that he and his wife discussed her evidence before the inquest and not after, as he originally testified, although this does not make sense. Hannah Phillips’s testimony provides a rare example of the press publishing a *less* sensational version, one that omitted Thomas Newport’s name and the accusations that Phillips said Chesham made about him, perhaps because the press feared Newport would take legal action if it implicated him in the case again.

⁴⁸ ASSI 36/6, deposition of John Holgate, September 20, 1850.

⁴⁹ “The Poisonings at Clavering,” *Daily News*, March 7, 1851, 6.

Jones might have pointed out the absence of evidence to prove how Richard Chesham came to have a non-lethal quantity of arsenic in his system or to show that Chesham was responsible for putting arsenic in the rice. He could have challenged the testimony of an agricultural labourer named Charles Clayden, who did not appear at either the inquest or before the magistrates but who popped up at the trial with a story about Richard Chesham complaining about stomach troubles after eating his wife's mince pies, thereby corroborating Hannah Phillips's story that Chesham boasted of feeding her husband poisoned pies while he worked in the fields. Jones might have poked holes in Hannah Phillips's tale and pointed out to the jury that the prosecution's case depended upon the testimony of one person who could offer no witnesses to confirm what she claimed the accused said to her. Sadly for Sarah Chesham, Serjeant Jones did not defend her.⁵⁰

Sarah Chesham's execution was not the final stage in her ordeal. Had she been convicted of murder, her body would have been buried within the precincts of Chelmsford jail. Because she was instead convicted of administering poison with the intent to murder, her family claimed her body and returned it to Clavering for burial; this prompted several outraged letters to the editor from people who objected to Christian burials for convicted poisoners.⁵¹ According to newspaper

⁵⁰ "The Poisonings at Clavering," *Daily News*, March 7, 1851, 6.-7.

⁵¹ See for example *Times*, April 4, 1851, 7, and *Bell's Life in London*, April 20, 1851.

reports, the local vicar refused to accept the body in the churchyard, and so it was placed in a temporary grave. Before her family could arrange for permanent burial, someone stole the body. It may never have been recovered. “The circumstance is shrouded in mystery,” one report concluded, “and has created the greatest excitement.”⁵²

Harriet, Philip and John Chesham were adults at the time of their mother’s death, but Sarah Chesham also left behind a third son, George, who would have been only twelve. A few months after her execution, Philip Chesham snuck into a shop and stole a waistcoat. He received a sentence of six months with hard labour. The judge who presided over his trial blamed the “very bad character” of Sarah Chesham for her son’s crime, which in the opinion of the judge reflected “a want of a proper education, and a disregard of the duty that devolved upon parents to bring up their children in a proper manner.”⁵³

Hannah and John Southgate had no further problems with the law, or at least not any that attracted the attention of the press. Thomas Newport left Clavering after Sarah Chesham’s trials in 1847. By the time Hannah Phillips made statements implicating him in Sarah Chesham’s crimes, he was living more than 22 miles away. Summoned to appear before the magistrates to

⁵² “The Late Sarah Chesham,” *Daily News*, April 14, 1851, 4, and “The Late Sarah Chesham: The Body Stolen,” *John Bull*, April 14, 1851, 16.

⁵³ “Assize Intelligence,” *Morning Chronicle*, July 23, 1851, 11.

answer to Phillips's allegations, he denied everything. To his displeasure, he was required to attend Sarah Chesham's 1851 trial, although he was not called as witness.⁵⁴

Mary May's widower's life did not end happily. In June 1851, he hanged himself using a rope fastened to a beam in his bedroom. His suicide closely followed the announcement of his engagement to Susannah Forster, the village schoolteacher who told Mary May about the burial society in Harwich, where Forster had enrolled her own brother as a member. His sister-in-law claimed that when Robert May paid a final visit to Mary May prior to her hanging, she vowed to haunt him if he ever married again. The May cottage, described as "a truly wretched hole . . . inferior to many pig-styes," was demolished as "its existence only serves to keep alive a morbid feeling from the horrid crimes of which it has been the theatre."

This chapter has drawn attention to the role of the press in the Essex poisonings cases, focusing on the gap between what the press reported and the evidence actually offered in court and drawing attention to the contradictions, inconsistencies and improbabilities in the testimony provided by witnesses such as Phoebe Reed, Charlotte Elvish and Hannah Phillips. A source that other scholars have treated as fundamentally accurate and objective was, I have argued, an active participant in creating and sustaining the myth that a network of female poisoners plied its trade

⁵⁴ The surviving archival records include a letter from Newport's solicitor pressing the government to reimburse him for the expenses he incurred. ASSI 36/6, letter dated April 26, 1851 from Marshall Straightley, Esq.

in Essex, supposedly with the tacit approval of the locals. Not one of the press's most alarming and frequently reproduced assertions about the Essex poisonings was proven in court.

Conclusion

Previous scholars who have written about the Essex poisonings have assumed that the story told in the columns of the Victorian press was a fundamentally accurate one. They have repeated the press's errors and treated unsubstantiated allegations as fact. Judith Knelman and Ian Burney both locate all the alleged poisonings in or near Clavering, oblivious to the distance between Clavering and Wix. Sarah Chesham enrolled her children in burial societies, claims Knelman, and the people of Clavering quietly accepted that some members of their community were murdered.¹ In George Robb's version, Mary May was the "evil genius" and Sarah Chesham a "confederate" whose "probable murders of two children and a neighbor," Robb inexplicably writes, "had gone undetected."² James C. Whorton, reverses the supposed relationship, calling Mary May one of Sarah Chesham's "recruits".³ For many researchers, the Essex poisonings form a very small part of a much larger project, which might help to account for their use of a single

¹ Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, 60 and 61.

² Robb, "Circe in Crinoline," 179 and 186.

³ Whorton, *The Arsenic Century*, 37. Whorton, who distorts the picture of how the press and the public responded to the Essex cases by quoting articles and editorials written about Sarah Chesham in 1851 in his account of the May/Southgate cases in 1848, also emphasizes Chesham's guilt, omitting evidence that worked in her favour and even writing, on page 128: "Sarah Chesham poisoned her sons with arsenic purchased ostensibly to kill rats," as though Chesham was convicted of these charges and was proved to have purchased and possessed arsenic.

source, such as *The Times*. Judith Knelman alone has written at length about the Essex poisonings and based her analysis on extensive newspaper research. Her failure to engage critically with her sources is therefore the most baffling, particularly given that her book purports to examine media sensationalism. She seems never to have considered the possibility that the version of events she read about in the Victorian press may not have been wholly accurate.

In contrast to previous treatments, this thesis has, following the example of Mary Hartman's *Victorian Murderesses*, emphasized the context in which the Essex poisonings took place. Instead of approaching this episode as a unique and seemingly spontaneous event, one that contributed to the introduction of restrictions on the sale of arsenic but that otherwise had little connection to outside events or ideas, I have argued that the Essex poisonings emerged and became the focus of intense national interest not because women actually conspired together to commit poison crimes, but because the public *believed* that poisoning was an increasingly common crime and working-class women were prone to commit murder for money. These cases stemmed from a single and relatively simple accusation and ultimately led to the deaths of two women, neither of whom received fair treatment at the hands of the courts or the press.

Lydia Taylor, I contend, believed that Sarah Chesham was administering poison to her baby in large part because the Victorian press had already helped to create a moral panic about criminal poisoning. A series of highly publicized but statistically insignificant cases made

poisoning seem a much more frequently committed crime than it actually was. At the same time, the circumstances of some of these poisonings suggested that the small sums of money paid out in the event of death by burial societies were providing the poor with the motive for murder. Despite widespread attention to this issue, and the repeated assertions of relieving officers, religious figures, physicians and undertakers that this was a real and growing problem, very few actual cases of murders committed for burial fees were ever identified. Only one of the Essex poisonings revolved around burial fees, but the press commonly represented all the alleged murders as having a financial motive. These were not the only cases in which the press asserted a link between the alleged crime and burial fees when none existed.

For the press, promoting the linked ideas of a poisoning epidemic and widespread child murder among the poor served a larger project of representing the working class as a dangerous and foreign body. The press attributed the seemingly sudden increase in criminal poisonings in the 1840s to the working class's uncivilized and immoral tendencies. Some scholars, such as Judith Knelman, have echoed this theory and argued that increasing numbers of women poisoned in these years not only because they were poor, ignorant and lacking in "moral training" but also because the hard economic conditions of these years led them to murder as a measure of economy. This thesis has argued instead that the supposed increase in poisonings had more to do with recent developments in toxicology that allowed doctors to detect and quantify arsenic in

human remains, and with related media attention to poison stories, whether criminal or accidental. Together, repeated assertions in the press and by social commentators and policy-makers that England was experiencing an epidemic of arsenic poisoning and murders for money created the context in which Lydia Taylor's suspicions of Sarah Chesham were first articulated and investigated.

The Victorian press was instrumental in disseminating and encouraging these ideas, but the media cannot be held solely responsible for what happened in Essex between 1846 and 1851. The evidence reveals the extent to which ordinary women drove the Essex poison trials. Some of the most important witnesses were the female relatives, neighbours and friends of the defendants, and without the testimony and depositions of these women, these cases would not have played out in the way they did. As poor women in a class-conscious, male-dominated society, the Essex defendants were undoubtedly doubly disadvantaged, and this disadvantage only increased when they became caught up in an exclusively male legal system that denied them the right to legal representation and did not allow defendants to speak in court. At key moments, however, the Essex defendants fought back, sometimes quite vigorously. Hannah Southgate, for example, did not hesitate to challenge her accusers in court, and Sarah Chesham, lacking proper legal representation during her final, fatal trial, attempted to defend herself.

The press represented all three defendants as guilty long before their cases actually reached the Courts of Assize, but probably only Mary May, who had enrolled her half-brother in a burial club without his knowledge and misrepresented his death in an effort to acquire the death benefits, committed murder. The verdict at Hannah Southgate's trial likely came as a surprise to those who had closely followed newspaper reports about the case. Here was a woman known for fighting with and threatening her first husband, usually when they had both had too much to drink, and who openly conducted an adulterous relationship with the man she subsequently married. She kept and used the poison that a respected toxicologist definitively stated had caused his death. Even without the contradictory, contradicted and improbable testimony of Phoebe Reed and Charlotte Elvish, the circumstantial evidence against Southgate might well have ended in a conviction and an execution. Certainly the tone of the newspaper coverage of the case leaves little doubt that the press presumed Southgate guilty, at least until the two lawyers who represented her — one during the inquest and the other at trial — attacked the credibility of the principal witnesses against her. Perhaps the verdict simply reflected the fact that an untruthful and sexually active domestic and a witness who had her own minor problems with the law (Elvish was once charged with the theft of potatoes) cancelled out Hannah Southgate's transgressions. Perhaps the verdict demonstrated how, even in the midst of an alleged poisoning epidemic, skilled representation in court could plant seeds of doubt in the minds of any jury.

Perhaps the gap between the inquest and trial also helped to defuse the situation, and if Southgate went before a jury hot on the heels of the inquest, as Mary May did, the outcome might have been different.

In the case of Sarah Chesham, this thesis may not have proved conclusively that she was innocent of all the charges against her, but it has demonstrated that none of the most widely circulated and frequently repeated allegations about her has any basis in truth. The woman widely misrepresented as “Sally Arsenic” turns out to have been, according to the evidence given by relatives and neighbours, an ordinary woman and a caring mother. She struggled to raise a large family with very little means and in less than ideal surroundings. She earned money when she could, and she needed her children to work also, once they were old enough. She turned to her friends and neighbours when her two sons became ill, and her grief over their deaths was apparent to all who knew her, including the vicar. Before the end of her life, Chesham unquestionably bore a reputation as a poisoner, but this developed *after* her acquittals in 1847 and was a product of the media-fuelled poisoning panic. She certainly did not receive a fair trial when she was charged in connection with her husband’s death, and the prosecution’s case fell far short of proving her guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Accounts of the Essex poisonings that perpetuate the misrepresentation of Sarah Chesham and misconstrue the facts only exacerbate the injustice that took place in 1851.

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