

Dear all,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this paper, which focuses on a late-nineteenth-century extortion trial surrounding an abortifacient pill scam. The paper is on the longer side (for which I'm sorry), and I would be particularly grateful to have your thoughts on where it might be pared down most effectively. Other feedback or suggestions are also very welcome.

Really looking forward to seeing you all in a few weeks!
Julia

One Saturday in October of 1898, London warehouseman William Clifford happened to intercept a letter addressed to his wife, Kate, from a “Public Official” by the name of Charles J. Mitchell. With “Victorian indifference to the privacy of his wife’s correspondence”, in the words of historian Angus McLaren, William opened the envelope to find two additional envelopes inside, one containing what must have been a deeply unsettling message.¹ “Madam”, it began, “I am in possession of letters of yours by which I can positively prove that you did commit, or attempt to commit, the fearful crime of abortion”.² Unless Kate used the second pre-addressed envelope to send two guineas³ to Charles by the upcoming Tuesday (ostensibly to cover the costs of contesting legal proceedings already underway against her), she would be “immediately arrested without further warning”. Once in police custody, she would be charged under the 58th Section of the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, facing a lifetime of penal servitude.

In October of 1897, Kate had seen an advertisement in the newspaper for “Lady Montrose’s Medicine Tabules for Female Ailments” and had indeed sent 4 shillings (*s*), 6 pence (*d*) to the Ludgate Circus address listed for a box of “miraculous” blue pills guaranteeing the removal of even “the most obstinate obstructions”.⁴ They failed, however, to remove Kate’s particular “obstruction”, who was safely delivered seven months later. Evidently, intimate details regarding Kate’s reproductive health had been discovered by or shared with Charles, whose letter was posted exactly one year after Kate had first sought help from “Lady Montrose”.

The next few months might have played out very differently had Kate herself opened the letter; of the over 8,000 other women to have received an identical letter posted on the same day

¹ Angus McLaren, “Abortion in England, 1890-1914”, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Indiana University Press, 1977), 386.

² “Great Blackmail Case”, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 27 November, 1898, 5.

³ Each guinea was equivalent to 1 pound, 1 shilling (or 21 shillings).

⁴ “Advertisements & Notices”, *Ipswich Journal*, 27 May, 1898, 2.

from the same “Public Official”, 2,996 had responded to Charles by November 23 in terrified and self-effacing letters containing over £1,130.⁵ Compliance must have appeared the only viable option to many, and understandably so. By ignoring the request, the recipient risked a lifetime of imprisonment. Seeking help from family or friends meant revealing potentially discrediting and deeply personal information. Going to the police for redress would be tantamount to admitting guilt of a criminal offense. For the women ensnared by Charles’s scheme, every choice was the wrong one. William Clifford, however, had the great good fortune of being a man, and promptly took the letter to his local police department in Snow Hill, where an inquiry into one of the most scandalous frauds of late Victorian London was immediately opened.

The subsequent arrests and trial of the appropriately named Chrimes Brothers – Richard (32), Edward (31), and Leonard (22) – made the headlines of publications in every corner of the British Isles throughout November and December.⁶ Over the course of the closely followed legal proceedings, the extent and skill of the Chrimes’ deception was revealed. Operating out of at least six separate offices and under nearly a dozen aliases – including Charles J. Mitchell – the brothers began selling useless abortifacient pills and powders in April of 1896, when the Lady Montrose Company first publicized its consciously ineffectual product through euphemistic newspaper advertisements promising a quick and effective solution to female “irregularities”.⁷ Unfortunately for the brothers, their decision less than three years into their operation to launch a blackmailing campaign against their own customer base – composed of roughly 12,000 women

⁵ “Blackmailing Women: How the Net Was Spread”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 December, 1898. To put this number in perspective, the Daimler Motor Company, founded in 1896, sold its prohibitively expensive motor cars – notably to royalty – at prices ranging between £190 and £290. “The Advent of the Motor Car”, *Leeds Mercury*, 18 November, 1896.

⁶ A complete list of the newspaper sources used in this paper can be found in the bibliography.

⁷ “The Alleged Wholesale Blackmailing”, *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 21 November, 1898, 3.

by 1898 – would be their downfall, triggering a weeks-long investigation by the London Metropolitan Police, opened thanks to William and his “Victorian indifference”.⁸

For such a fascinating case, the Chrimes trial has received minimal historiographical attention. Although briefly cited in a handful of works on abortion and contraception⁹, the case has been treated as the primary subject of historical inquiry only once, in a 1977 article by Angus McLaren, who skillfully summarized the details of the criminal operation, and contextualized the trial with insight into the gendered opposition of the medical profession. Women “had to continue to resort to old-fashioned and frequently dangerous remedies”, McLaren argues, because of “the medical profession’s refusal to provide them with information on contraception”.¹⁰ “If the activities of the Chrimes brothers...teach us anything”, he continues, “it is that there was then – as there is today – a demand for abortion and if that demand was not met by the medical profession it was met by others”.¹¹ It is certainly true that the Chrimes trial teaches us something about the relationship between gender and medicine, though *what* exactly is taught is perhaps less certain. One need only look at the vigorous campaigning against the Contagious Diseases Acts a few decades earlier to see the mistrust and animosity harbored by women across classes against the increasingly obtrusive (and male-dominated) English medical profession.¹² More basically, however, considering women had obtained, performed, and passed on knowledge about abortions for centuries – millennia, even – without the intervention of male

⁸ “The Great Blackmailing Scandal: Two Arrests”, *The Manchester Weekly Times*, 18 November, 1898, 3.

⁹ See McLaren, “Abortion in England”; Shirley Green, *The Curious History of Contraception* (London: Ebury Press, 1971), 173-174; Patricia Knight, “Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England”, *History Workshop*, No. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 62; R. Sauer, “Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, *Population Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1978), 91.

¹⁰ McLaren, “Abortion in England”, 399.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 400.

¹² Margaret Hamilton, “Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act”, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 1978. Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), .

doctors, the moralizing disapproval of late-nineteenth-century professional medicine seems insufficient explanation for the appearance of these Montrosian schemes.

Such historiographical inattention is in part attributable to methodological difficulties: Almost none of the ideal primary source documents produced by this fleeting moment in London's expansive criminal history are extant or available today. Records cited by the trial's prosecution were so disastrously disorganized as to prompt the judge to protest that "there had not been the slightest attempt made to arrange the exhibits...and if the tape which held them together were cut they would all fly out into the Court, and out of the Court if they could".¹³ Letters intercepted by the police during the investigation were mercifully returned to senders. No trial transcripts were kept at the Old Bailey, the "particulars of this case" being "unfit for publication".¹⁴ Of the nearly four dozen witnesses called throughout the course of the trial, six were women; of those six, only four were themselves victims of the blackmail scheme, the court having "consented to call as few as possible of the victims".¹⁵ And, those who were subpoenaed to give evidence were ensured anonymity in exchange for testifying to such "a painful matter".¹⁶ The trial is not mentioned in the memoirs of either prosecutor, or the judge. Whether any notes exist from the investigation itself is unknown, as the City of London Police Detective Division records in the London Metropolitan Archives are missing for the decade of the 1890s. And though the case was followed closely by newspapers, published accounts were, ironically, equally sensationalized for a curious public and censored for that public's moral wellbeing.

¹³ "Central Criminal Court", *The Times*, December 20, 1898, 9.

¹⁴ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 14 March 2021), December 1898, trial of Richard Chrimes (32) Edward Chrimes (31) Leonard Chrimes (22) (t18981212-90).

¹⁵ One of the women was Richard's wife, and the other was a "caretaker" of a property leased by the brothers. "Blackmailing Women: 24,000 Guineas Demanded", *The Daily Telegraph*, December 18, 1898, 3. "Central Criminal Court: Dec. 19", *The Times*, December 20, 1898, 9.

¹⁶ "The Alleged Blackmailing Plot", *The Morning Post*, November 29, 1898, 6.

The scarcity of sources – a scarcity wildly disproportionate to the scale of the event – is of course deeply frustrating: No unmitigated accounts exist of the experiences or perspectives of the 12,000 women implicated in this story. However, instead of diagnosing their absence as a symptom of a culture in which the agency of women was disregarded or disavowed in matters of medicine and contraception, this paper understands the scarcity of women to be a valuable indication that this story’s historical significance lies, in fact, largely *outside* of medicine and contraception. Available evidence, overwhelmingly composed of journalistic accounts of the trial, is conspicuous, masculine, and anomalous insofar as it made news out of a practice that was unnewsworthy in both its frequency and intimacy – not, therefore, a terribly reliable medium of insight into a distinctly female practice that, when successful, remained undetected by contemporaries and unknowable to historians. In fact, nineteenth-century abortions and the women who sought them are both patently absent from the story, which, at heart, is one of commerce, commodification, and the marketing (and marketability) of gendered labor.

The Chrimes’s business, loathsomely lucrative though it was, did *not* sell abortifacients, and the crime at the center of the scandal was extortion, *not* abortion. By perpetuating the assumption that the Chrimes trial is inherently relevant to histories of abortion and contraception, we fall prey to the same brilliant marketing scheme that deceived 12,000 Londoners. That the Chrimes brothers did not actually have to *be* abortionists to be hugely successful “purveyors” of abortion is worthy of consideration, and while their authority on the practice of abortion is dubious at very best, their success in the *business* of abortion is undeniable – a crucial distinction that has not been sufficiently explored in existing historiography. This paper is an early attempt at investigating the mechanisms that allowed for the separation of the practice and the business, at exploring the lucrative convergence of commercialization, urbanization, and mass media that

allowed three men to enter displaced female knowledge networks and exploit an increasingly fragile culture of gendered aid.

Indebted as it is to late-Victorian journalism, the source base of this paper has clear limitations: the articles from which the trial has been pieced together do not by any stretch of the imagination constitute an objective, disinterested account. The peculiar cultural climate of London in 1898 and the reality that these stories were not so much told as *sold* endow these accounts with a strange mixture of euphemistic morality and an intriguing salaciousness. If the motivations and intended audiences of their authors are kept in mind, however, these sources can effectively speak not only to the particulars of the Chrimes operation, but also to the legal, cultural, and economic conditions that made the operation such a success.

The following section explores the Lady Montrose operation, whose commodifying business model and ingenious marketing strategy persuaded nineteenth-century consumers (and some twentieth-century historians) of Lady Montrose's authority on abortion. The second section examines the surviving documentation of a trial concerned not with the immorality of abortion, but the precariousness of Victorian consumerism. The final section is a very preliminary attempt to recover the absent perspective of the women for whom this incident truly *was* about abortion.

I.

In the 1890s, the visual landscape of Ludgate Circus was dominated by two towering fixtures, two unofficial monuments to life in London at the close of the nineteenth century. The first – and “surely the most hideous” of “all the eyesores of modern London” – was the Ludgate Hill Viaduct, which spanned the convergence of Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street like “a bar of metal on the breast of a wretch in a torture-chamber”, according to one apparently

underwhelmed contemporary.¹⁷ Built in 1865 and quickly overrun with passengers, the Ludgate Hill railway station was busy enough to occasion the opening of the adjacent, six-platform Holborn Viaduct in less than a decade, and loomed over the bustling intersection as a testament to the unprecedented mobility enabled by the explosion of railway lines in the early and mid-nineteenth century.¹⁸ The second fixture, bridging an entire top story, was an illuminated, flaring “BOVRIL” sign – an advertisement for salty beef paste – whose demonstration of the power and potential of capitalist consumer culture dazzled the thousands of passersby who walked beneath it every day. Despite (or perhaps due to) these monuments to British modernity, Ludgate Circus was not the sort of place one would care to find oneself alone at night.¹⁹ Given the anonymity offered by a massive, dynamic urban population, the profit embodied in *literally* glowing advertisements for consumer goods, and the less-than-reputable nature of the neighborhood, it seems fitting that Richard, Edward, and Leonard would open up shop here in April of 1896.

The “shop” in question – 64 Imperial Buildings, Ludgate Circus – was really nothing more than a “very capacious letter-box” to the Chrimes brothers, who used the single rented

LADIES ONLY,
MARRIED OR SINGLE.
 THE LADY MONTROSE'S MIRACULOUS
FEMALE MEDICINAL TABULES.
 Will positively cure the most OBSTINATE OBSTRUCTIONS, Irregularities, &c., from any cause, in eight hours. Being SPECIALLY prepared, they are guaranteed stronger in action than the strongest LIQUID mixture on earth. Failure is absolutely impossible. Post free, under cover, with full directions and advice, 4s. 6d., with a written guarantee to cure. One case amply sufficient. A special and valuable OUTWARD remedy sent free.
 Mrs. N., Warrington, writes:—"Am overwhelmed with delight to say that your miraculous (for miraculous they are) Tabules *painlessly restored regularity* before taking one quarter of a box."
 "After taking the last dose late Saturday night, I was quite well early Sunday morning."—Mrs. C., Dartford.
 "I heard from my sister, Mrs. Weentell, to say they had *proved successful*. She is exceedingly grateful."—Mrs. H., Northern Hospital, London.
 "After taking the second dose of Tabules I was *all right*. . . . Wishing you every prosperity."—Mrs. M. E.
 "After taking the third Tabule all was as I desired."—Mrs. L., Elm Grove, B'head.
 "Received Tabules safely, and followed your directions. Extremely pleased at result, without any unpleasantness whatever."—G. L. B., Malvern.
 The above Testimonials (and Thousands of others) are sworn under oath before one of Her Majesty's Commissioners for Oaths to be true and genuine.
 Don't delay. Send to-day for full particulars and conclusive proofs. Be cured without trouble and expense with *one* case of these startling Tabules.
 Address—
H. P. N. MONTROSE,
 64, Imperial Buildings, Ludgate Circus, London.
 (Highest Professional advice, by letter only, always free.)
 I never have a single disappointment, and we have a Medical Certificate GUARANTEEING these Tabules.

Figure 1 Illustrated Police News, 24 April, 1897

¹⁷ Walter Thornbury, 'Ludgate Hill', in *Old and New London: Volume 1* (London, 1878), pp. 220-233. *British History Online*.

¹⁸ *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History: From 1603 to the 1990s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 289.

¹⁹ After asking whether this area was near the “flaring advertisement”, Judge Henry Hawkins sparked laughter in the courtroom by adding, “Well, I never come near there by night”. “Central Criminal Court: The Charge of Blackmailing Women”, *The Standard*, 19 December, 1898, 2.

room to receive orders placed for “Lady Montrose Medicine Tablets”.²⁰ These “miraculous” tablets – “acknowledged by ladies throughout the world to be worth a guinea per tabule” – were advertised extensively in newspapers with taglines assuring potential customers that the “thousands” of rapturous testimonials given “were each sworn under oath before one of her Majesty’s Commissioners of Oaths to be true and genuine”.²¹ No other medication was as effective at removing female “irregularities”, the advertisements assured: “It is utterly impossible for [other] weak water and medicine remedies to be as strong, powerful, irresistible, [or] compressed” as the Montrose pill.²²

Sold at 4s 6d, per box, Montrose pills were by no means an insignificant expenditure to working-class families.²³ Charles Booth’s 1889-1891 poverty study of London found the “poor” (or “those who have sufficiently regular though bare income, such as 18s to 21s per week”) and the “very poor” (“those who from any cause fall much below this standard”) comprised 35% of the city’s population.²⁴ Booth also found that “fully half of the women who have to support themselves seek a livelihood in semi-domestic employments”, which were, uncoincidentally, also the occupations in which “the greatest apparent poverty exists”.²⁵ If roughly one third of London’s population subsisted on 21s per week or less, and women were disproportionately represented in the lowest-earning occupations (when they were employed at all), a 4s 6d

²⁰ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

²¹ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

²² “The London Sensation: Blackmailing Women”, *North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 21 November, 1898; “The Alleged Wholesale Blackmailing”, *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 21 November, 1898, 3; “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

²³ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

²⁴ “Poor” was described by Booth as “living under a struggle to obtain the necessities of life and make both ends meet”, while “very poor” meant living “in a state of chronic want”. Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1904), 33, 62. Another estimate reveals that, in 1906, two thirds of all adult workmen earned under 25 shillings a week. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45.

²⁵ Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 62

purchase would have been hard to swing on a working-class budget. The variable, inconsistent, part-time, and frequently domestic nature of married women's wage-earning – measuring the rates of which being notoriously difficult for historians – in addition to the fraught intra-family allocation of the male breadwinner's wages meant, too, that, even if extra funds existed, wives had little recourse should their husbands decide to take that 4s 6d to the local pub.²⁶

Despite the significant expense, the Lady Montrose pill was an astonishing commercial success: Children had an inconvenient tendency to cost more than 4s 6d, after all. A steady stream of letters addressed to “H. A. N. Montrose” trickled into the Ludgate Circus office, where they would be picked up by the brothers (or a hired party) and taken to one of five separate addresses used in a scheme that turned out to be far more convoluted than a straightforward mail-order pill scam. In addition to their Ludgate Circus address, the brothers (using the alias “Richard Randall”) leased 73 Kensington Chambers as the operation's unofficial office.²⁷ Edward, under the name of “Knowles”, rented 7 Pleydell Street to serve as the “headquarters” of the Panolia Company (about which more below).²⁸ Under “Bradbury”, the brothers also rented 89 Farringdon Street to be used “as a central dépôt for correspondence from all the other offices and for pills, medicines, &c”.²⁹ In October of 1898, “Charles J. Mitchell” (or, Leonard) leased an office in Trafalgar Buildings on Northumberland Avenue as a part of the blackmailing scheme.³⁰

²⁶ Ellen Ross, “‘Fierce Questions and Taunts’: Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982); Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, and Eve Hostettler, “Labouring Women: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm”, *History Workshop*, No.8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Andrew August, “How Separate A Sphere? Poor Women and Paid Work in Late-Victorian London”, *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 19 (1994); Edward Higgs and Amanda Wilkinson, “Women, Occupations and Work in the Victorian Censuses Revisited”, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 81 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁷ “Blackmailing Women: Two Members of the Alleged Gang Remanded”, *Daily Mail, London*, 17 November, 1898, 5; “The Great Blackmailing Scandal: Two Arrests”, *The Manchester Weekly Times*, 18 November, 1898, 3.

²⁸ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

²⁹ “Blackmailing Case: Alderman Newton and Noxious Advertisements”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 December, 1898, 5; “Blackmailing Women: Two Members of the Alleged Gang Remanded”, *Daily Mail, London*, 17 November, 1898, 5.

³⁰ “The Great Blackmailing Scandal: Two Arrests”, *The Manchester Weekly Times*, 18 November, 1898, 3.

And, 1 Boverie Street, according to *The Times*, was “used for nothing at all, except, perhaps, as a quiet place for the concoction of the web of the nefarious and horrible crime”.³¹

As geographically decentralized as it was morally repulsive, the brothers’ business plan was also strategically impeccable. They began by recruiting the services of Mr. Stephen Wand, a Leicester chemist, who supplied them with tabules “made of reduced iron, gentian, tincture of quinine, arsenious iron, and nux vomica” – a blood tonic that all parties knew had “no special value for female ailments”.³² In fact, as Leonard revealed upon his arrest, not only were the pills “quite harmless”, but the chemist himself gave the brothers “a certificate to that effect” to be shown “to the newspaper people before they would put the advertisements in”.³³

Predictably, newspaper advertisements were the next step, to which the brothers committed with characteristic immoderation. Advertisements of this nature were nothing new to the British press – in fact, the pervasiveness of the practice would become a major topic at trial – and one former employee of Leonard’s testified that, on his first day, “a Newspaper Press Directory was handed to him by that prisoner, who instructed him to address envelopes to all the newspapers in Great Britain”.³⁴ But just because these advertisements were common did not mean they were cheap. Prosecuting counsel elicited from an advertising agent witness that these advertisements were five times the cost of their more run-of-the-mill counterparts.³⁵ This witness

³¹ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

³² “Victims of Blackmailers: What the ‘Montrose’ Tabules Consisted Of”, *Daily Mail, London*, 29 November, 1898, 3; “The Charge of Blackmailing Women”, *The Standard*, 29 November, 1898, 6.

³³ “The Blackmailing Charges: Strong Comments by an Alderman. ‘An Ugly Blot on the Press’”, *The Daily News*, 3 December, 1898, 9; “Blackmailing Case: Alderman Newton and Noxious Advertisements”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 December, 1898, 5.

³⁴ “The Charge of Blackmailing Women: Resumed Proceedings”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 2 December, 1898; “The Great Blackmailing Scandal: Adjourned Hearings in the Police Court”, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 2 December 1898, 4.

³⁵ “The Alleged Blackmailing: Magisterial Proceedings”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 28 November, 1898; “Victims of Blackmailers: What the ‘Montrose’ Tabules Consisted Of”, *Daily Mail, London*, 29 November, 1898, 3.

admitted to having been paid over £2,000³⁶ by the brothers over the course of their business relationship, adding that “his business in advertisements for female remedies was small compared with other agencies”.³⁷

Having acquired useless pills and advertised their efficacy far and wide, the Chrimes brothers had only partially set their trap: The first sale was just the beginning. A woman who submitted an order form (asking for “name, address, street, town or village, county, and then date”³⁸) and payment for Lady Montrose’s tablets would, in addition to receiving the pills (that would inevitably fail to “bring about what was desired”³⁹), frequently also receive marketing material from “The Manageress” at Panolia Company, who also happened to be Richard, Edward, and Leonard.⁴⁰ The brothers “played the Montrose against the Panolia medicine in a rather peculiar way”, revealing that, while there may be “hundreds of advertised remedies”, all women “at last had to fall back on Panolia, the price of which, in confidence, was 22 s. a bottle”.⁴¹ The Panolia literature “stated that no advertised medicines were of any efficacy for the obvious reason that if they were efficacious it would be dangerous to advertise them, but that the

³⁶ Though almost unbelievably high, this small fortune is recorded by multiple newspapers. “The Alleged Blackmailing in London”, *The Belfast News-Letter*, 29 November, 1898, 3. “Great Blackmailing Case: Thousands of Letters”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 3.

³⁷ “Great Blackmailing Case: Thousands of Letters”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 3. Police warnings to newspapers “that they would come within the law if they continued to insert advertisements of that class” seemed to fall on selectively deaf ears. One *Daily News* article covering the trial, entitled “An Ugly Blot on the Press”, recounted the Alderman’s shock at the prevalence of such displays – in “publications not by any means of the gutter type”, no less – and his disappointment in the urban and provincial papers alike in which “rank advertisements luxuriate, only to produce an appalling crop of pruriency and crime”. Running alongside the article was an advertisement for Beecham’s laxatives, promising women no better solution for “removing any obstruction or irregularity of the system”. “The Alleged Blackmailing of Women: A Diabolical Conspiracy [sic]: A Warning to Newspaper Managers”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 21 November, 1898; “The Blackmailing Charges: Strong Comments by an Alderman. ‘An Ugly Blot on the Press’”, *The Daily News*, 3 December, 1898, 9; “The Blackmailing Charges: Strong Comments by an Alderman. ‘An Ugly Blot on the Press’”, *The Daily News*, 3 December, 1898, 9.

³⁸ “Blackmailing Women: How the Net Was Spread”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 December, 1898, 9.

³⁹ “Victims of Blackmailers: What the ‘Montrose’ Tabules Consisted Of”, *Daily Mail, London*, 29 November, 1898, 3.

⁴⁰ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

⁴¹ “The Charge of Blackmailing Women: Further Hearing”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 November, 1898, 5; “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9.

Panolia remedy, which was unadvertised, was perfectly efficient, relying as it did on the private recommendation of one lady to another”.⁴² When a woman was slow to respond, the brothers sent another letter from “The Manageress”, who was “rather surprised” not to have heard back, offering the 22s bottle at the cut price of five shillings.⁴³

Three brothers, absent any moral qualms; six rented offices, absent any businesses; one Lady Montrose, absent any lady. The latter absence is perhaps the easiest to interpret, or so thought the judge at trial, who “said the reason for signing as ‘Lady Montrose’ was obvious”.⁴⁴ And, by no means were the Chrimes brothers the only nineteenth-century “abortionists” hiding behind a marketing façade of womanhood: The aforementioned advertising agent admitted that he ran similar advertisements for a “Madame Frain” and “Mrs. Rose”, though was not responsible for those of “Madame Douglas” or “Mrs. M., of Stockwell-road”.⁴⁵ One “pathetic appeal to ‘Montrose’”, whom the writer “evidently believed to be a woman, for she addressed him as ‘Madam’”, suggests that customers generally trusted that the “Lady” to whom they turned “for help in [their] trouble” was a woman.⁴⁶

It is difficult to know exactly what proportion of these scams were run by men, but less difficult to guess that many were. “Madame Frain”, for instance, was revealed to be William Brown of Hackney Road in a trial following the Chrimes’ by less than a year.⁴⁷ The *British Medical Journal* was quick to voice its disapproval of the “speciously worded” advertisements which “appeared to hold out to women an easy means of escape from the consequences of an act of indiscretion” – though “easy” seems an out-of-touch qualifier for an escape that cost “women

⁴² “Central Criminal Court, Dec. 16”, *The Times*, 17 December, 1898, 14.

⁴³ “The Charge of Blackmailing Women: Further Hearing”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 November, 1898, 5.

⁴⁴ “The Blackmailing Case”, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 December, 1898, 7.

⁴⁵ “Great Blackmail Case”, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 4 December 1898, 5; “Great Blackmailing Case: Thousands of Letters”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 5.

⁴⁶ “The Blackmailing Scandal”, *The Tamworth Herald*, 3 December, 1898, 6.

⁴⁷ McLaren, “Abortion in England”, 388.

in the humbler classes of life” anywhere from 16s to £2, and did not work.⁴⁸ McLaren suspected that “the cautious firms, such as ‘E. T. Towle’s’ and ‘Blanchard’s’”, who were “amongst the largest purveyors of abortifacients, if one judged by volume of advertising”, were spared prosecution by nature of their more circumspect business dealings.⁴⁹ McLaren’s assessment is undeniably possible – probable, even – but one can’t help but wonder if the gender neutrality of “Towle” and “Blanchard” contributed to their impunity. Perhaps the “Madames”, “Manageresses”, and “Ladies” were hauled into court because London’s criminal justice apparatus – not unlike the women victimized by these schemes – was unable to recognize an industrious businessman behind feminine honorifics.

That three snake oil salesmen in the heart of London managed to sustain a mail-order business scam aimed at a particularly vulnerable demographic is not terribly surprising. What *is* surprising about the Montrose scheme has far less to do with the “abortions” sold than it does the business of selling them, made viable by new commercial practices that were totally incompatible with – and yet only successful because of – the traditions surrounding the practice.

Abortion in Britain had been, and to some extent still was, a service (or a personal practice), requiring generationally-transferred expertise, and a social network of women through which to acquire it.⁵⁰ The figure of the “abortionist” – not infrequently also the midwife – was known within a community, embedded in a social network, and accountable, like any

⁴⁸ “The Sale of Abortifacients”, *The British Medical Journal*, 2 December, 1899, 1583-1584.

⁴⁹ McLaren, “Abortion in England”, 389.

⁵⁰ Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender, and Family in Victorian England* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 231-232; Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-39* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 150, 159-160 [Cf. Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 429-431]; Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 63-64; Patricia Knight, “Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England”, 60; Carla Spivack, “To ‘Bring Down the Flowers’: The Cultural Context of Abortion Law in Early Modern England”, *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2007.

professional, for the quality of her work, upon which her reputation and livelihood depended.⁵¹

Lucinda McCray Beier's oral history of three Lancashire towns, tracing the shift from "traditional to biomedical conceptualization and management of health" from 1880 to 1970, speaks to the importance of the female "neighborhood health authorities" on broader natal and maternal health, who were well-versed in herbal remedies and traditional treatments and whose personal reputations were critical to their professional success.⁵² Not only were they "specialized participants in the mutual aid networks that were essential to working-class family survival", they comprised a knowledge network dominated by and perpetuated through women.⁵³

This is not to say that abortions obtained through these networks were inherently safer or more effective: Even if performed solely by women, abortions could still be dangerous, misinformation persisted, things went wrong. And, for anyone without access to such networks, an abortion could be all but impossible to obtain. Even still, the mail-order model carried greater risks than the abortion-as-service, which necessarily brought with it some degree of assurance and connection. "Abortion was a social act involving initial transfer of information between women", argues Diana Gittins, endowing the practice was a social nature that facilitated not only shared knowledge but shared experience, as the act was often performed by a woman outside the nuclear family of the woman seeking an abortion.⁵⁴ This gendered social element differentiated abortion from other forms of contraception, as Kate Fisher observed in her study of twentieth-century working-class marriages, which found abortion exceptional insofar as it could be

⁵¹ "If all else failed the professional was called in. "The skilled abortionist, though, valued herself by no means cheaply. Our local practitioner, my mother told us long afterwards, was never crude enough to mention fees for kindly services rendered. 'Any trinket will do dear,' she used to say - 'in gold'! This meant rock bottom price - half a sovereign!". McLaren, "Abortion in England", 396.

⁵² Lucinda McCray Beier, *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880-1970* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008), 55, 74, 363.

⁵³ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁴ Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex*, 159-160.

discussed without reference to sex itself and did not require the forethought (often equated with inappropriate sexual anticipation) that, say, a diaphragm would. The extent to which men were unusually ignorant about abortion, and isolated from related female knowledge networks, is revealed in the questions addressed to Marie Stopes about the practice: “they were forced to try and get information from a nationally renowned figure”.⁵⁵

Not only distinctly gendered, abortion was also a practice contingent on locality, as Patricia Knight acknowledges in her characterization of “knowledge of drugs likely to produce an abortion” as a “local folklore, handed down from generation to generation, and passed on from one woman to another”, a characterization shared by Ellen Ross.⁵⁶ McCray Beier found the stability of a neighborhood to be critical in determining the strength and size of these medical-social networks.⁵⁷ Ross observes a similar interdependence, noting that, as nineteenth-century “now-urban women were cut off from both the local networks and the flora that had provided them with medicines of all kinds, new patterns of abortion and new methods began to emerge”.⁵⁸

As might be expected, historians are not in perfect agreement about exactly when these new patterns and methods emerged. Beier, Gittins, and Fisher locate change in the twentieth century, Ross and Knight in the nineteenth. The nature of the matter attests to truth in all arguments: It’s likely that a practice as private and dissimilar as abortion did not undergo uniform or simultaneous national transformations, but instead evolved independently alongside local communities. More useful than pinpointing the moment abortion ceased to exist solely within the realm of highly social, distinctly female labor, then, is understanding the forces that effected such a transformation. The Chrimes brothers were beneficiaries of one such force:

⁵⁵ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage*, 63-65.

⁵⁶ Patricia Knight, “Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England”, 60. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil*, 104.

⁵⁷ McCray Beier, *For Their Own Good*, 45.

⁵⁸ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil*, 104.

Commodification. The “abortion” sold in 1896 by the Chrimes brothers, looking nothing like the female-dominated service it was still understood to be, had become a commodity obtainable over an anonymous mail system servicing a massive, unsettled population. The late nineteenth-century urban “abortionist” could be wildly successful even if her customers had never met her, even if her office was perpetually empty, even if she was a man (or three).

And, even more astonishing, the nineteenth-century “abortionist” could thrive without *ever providing a single abortion*. The real efficacy of the Lady Montrose pill at terminating pregnancy was irrelevant to its purveyors and unknowable to its consumers; a meaningful “use value” no longer needed to exist for an “exchange value” to emerge. Marx’s commodity fetishism is useful in identifying the “mysterious”, even intrinsic, quality of a commodity’s market value – a value untethered to the object’s utility and benefited by obfuscation in the production process (it’s hard to judge the value of a linen coat, or an abortion pill, when you know nothing about how, or by whom, it was made).⁵⁹ But Marx’s claim that, then, “a definite social relation between men...assumes...the fantastic form of a relation between things” – or, put differently, that the commodification process encourages the relationship between things to mask the relationship between laborers – does not adequately address the added complexity of distinctly gendered labor. With abortion, for example, the “social relation” – which, *pace* Marx’s “men”, also existed between women – was not so much displaced as it was *itself* commodified.

After all, no one knew better than the Chrimes brothers that abortion was not for sale by Lady Montrose, who herself was the extent of the product’s value. In effect, the brothers were selling access to the knowledge network Lady Montrose claimed to represent – an increasingly inaccessible commodity to unprecedentedly mobile, migrant, and urban populations. Put

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One* in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 321.

differently, even when the market for commodified abortion operated *in practice* entirely outside inherited, highly social female knowledge networks, its health depended on belying that reality. The centrality of the non-existent Lady Montrose and Madame Frain to the advertising strategies of the men behind them proves these networks – these “social relation[s]” – were quite literally more valuable than ever.

Take, for example, the (fictitious) reviews from (fictitious) “women as to the success of the tabloids or pills”, the dozens of “lithographed letters” from pleased female customers, which were, in reality, no more authentic than the Lady whose product they praised.⁶⁰ The Panolia Company founded its entire marketing strategy on eschewing the industry tactics that had invented it, disparaging mail-order companies that advertised in newspapers only because they could not rely, as Panolia ostensibly did, “solely on the private recommendation of one lady to another”.⁶¹ By correctly valuing the gendered, intra-community framework through which abortion had traditionally been obtained, the Chrimes brothers recognized its precarity in an urban environment – saw a market gap in the form of a communal one – and made a killing.⁶²

In only two and a half years of operation, the Chrimes brothers had amassed over 12,000 customers, making an average profit of £40 a week.⁶³ Had Richard, Edward, and Leonard remained content with scamming women out of hard-earned, much-needed money by exploiting their reproductive health, their ruse may have been lost to history. Thankfully for the historian, their ill-advised blackmail plan was put into motion in September of 1898, uncovered in October, and prosecuted in December. A lot can be surmised about the desperate straits of countless

⁶⁰ “Great Blackmailing Case”, *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 27 November, 1898, 5; “The Alleged Blackmailing of Women”, *The Manchester Weekly Times*, 2 December, 1898, 3.

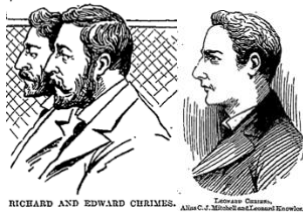
⁶¹ “Great Blackmailing Case: Thousands of Letters”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 5.

⁶² “The Charge of Blackmailing Women: Further Hearing”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 November, 1898, 5.

⁶³ “The Great Blackmailing Fraud”, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 November, 1898, 4; “The Great Blackmailing Plot”, *Daily Mail, London*, 22 November, 1898, 3; “Alleged Horrible Blackmail Plot”, *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 24 November, 1898, 3; “Blackmailing of Women”, *Western Mail*, 3 December, 1898, 8.

London women from the casual aside that, weeks after the highly publicized arrests and trial, new order requests continued to accumulate in the empty Ludgate office, where, so perfectly camouflaged among flashing billboards and swarming train stations, the late nineteenth-century abortion was (or, rather, was *not*) sold.⁶⁴

II



RICHARD AND EDWARD CHRIMES—*Illustration by J. Mitchell del. and L. Carroll sculp.*
Figures 2 & 3 "The Richard or Chrimes, Charges of Blackmailing Women", *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 26 November, 1898.

Ironically, it was only a few blocks from the Ludgate Circus office to the Old Bailey, where the brothers' Central Criminal Court trial began, before a jury of twelve men⁶⁵, on December 16 with an announcement from Mr. Wilberforce and Mr. Hutton – defense counsel for Edward and Leonard, respectively – that the two youngest brothers had decided to withdraw their pleas of "not guilty" to the charge of "sending a letter to a woman, accusing her of a certain crime, with the intent to extort a sum of two guineas from her".⁶⁶ Richard, represented by a Mr. Waddy, held to his "not guilty" plea.

A "swarthy" Londoner with a number of tattoos (including a large anchor on his forearm⁶⁷), Richard had been arrested in the Penge grocery store he had purchased for £46 only weeks before on October 12, reportedly greeting the detectives from behind the counter "as blandly and readily as if he had been accustomed to the business all his life".⁶⁸ Edward was also arrested there, doing his futile best to keep himself "carefully hidden" by posing as a lodger.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ "The Charge of Blackmailing Women", *The Standard*, 29 November, 1898, 6.

⁶⁵ Women would not be allowed on juries until the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice – Judges and Juries", *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*.

⁶⁶ "The Charge of Blackmailing Women", *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 16 December, 1898, 5.

⁶⁷ *The Digital Panopticon* Richard Chrimes b. 1866, Life Archive ID obpdef1-90-18981212; *The Digital Panopticon* Edward Chrimes b. 1867, Life Archive ID obpdef2-90-18981212; *The Digital Panopticon* Leonard Chrimes b. 1876, Life Archive ID obpdef3-90-18981212.

⁶⁸ "The Charge of Extorting Money", *The Times*, 3 December, 1898, 9; "Blackmailing Women", *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 22 November, 1898, 6; "Blackmailing Women", *The Bristol Mercury*, 22 November, 1898, 8; "Alleged Blackmailing", *The Morning Post*, 17 November, 1898, 7.

⁶⁹ "Blackmailing Women", *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 22 November, 1898, 6.

Leonard was not arrested until November 20, having fled over two hundred miles to a farm in a small village near St. Austell, Cornwall, where he was reportedly “entering upon negotiations for learning the useful and innocuous art of poultry-farming”.⁷⁰ The detectives who tracked him down evidently had a taste for the melodramatic, “present[ing] themselves at his bedside in the early morning”, describing “his surprise and dismay” upon awakening as ““something worth seeing””.⁷¹ Although newspapers found Leonard to be a “smart-looking man” with an “advantage over his brothers in appearance and address”, he was only twenty-two on that December day, and must have felt a good deal of residual surprise and dismay at finding himself at the Old Bailey.⁷²

And that dismay would not have been misplaced: The Crown prosecutors made a skillful team. Well into a highly successful career by 1898, senior counsel Charles Mathews had a knack for “winning a verdict often unjustified by the evidence he had to offer”, thanks to a “natural skill of playing upon the emotions of the jury”.⁷³ If you “heard him in action”, remarked one contemporary, “you did not need to be told that he was the son of an actor”.⁷⁴ Representing an “exactly opposite [style] of advocacy”, co-counsel Richard Muir was still in the early stages of his career. Unlike Mathews, Muir “never descended to theatrical effects”, instead finding success in putting “important questions in a quiet, conversational way that enabled him to get the reply he wanted without the witness being aware of the value of his answer”.⁷⁵ The efficacy of Muir’s approach would see him prosecute some of the most high-profile cases in Edwardian London

⁷⁰ “The Charge of Attempting to Extort Money”, *The Times*, 22 November, 1898, 9; “The Charge of Blackmailing Women”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 November, 1898; “Alleged Horrible Blackmail Plot”, *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 24 November, 1898, 3; “The Great Blackmailing Fraud”, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 November, 1898, 4.

⁷¹ “The Great Blackmailing Fraud”, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 November, 1898, 4.

⁷² “London Week by Week”, *The Leeds Times*, 3 December, 1898, 3.

⁷³ “Mathews [formerly West], Sir Charles Willie, baronet, *Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September, 2004; Sidney Theodore Felstead, *Sir Richard Muir: A Memoir of a Public Prosecutor* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1927), 7.

⁷⁴ Felstead, *Sir Richard Muir*, 7.

⁷⁵ Felstead, *Sir Richard Muir*, 7.

(including that of infamous wife-murderer Hawley Harvey Crippen, who apparently wished his prosecution “had been anybody else but him”).⁷⁶

At eighty-one, the presiding judge – Justice Henry Hawkins – was also quite the character.⁷⁷ For years, “Jack, the fox terrier, was Sir Henry’s inseparable companion and friend”, sitting – not always quietly – beneath the judge’s feet during trials.⁷⁸ No “believer in the open window or in systems of ventilation”, Hawkins also had a cruel predilection for keeping courtroom doors and windows tightly shut in all weather, a practice that inspired his depiction in *Punch* as “rising from his coffin after death and angrily ordering the sorrowing mourners to shut down the lid, so as to keep out the draught!”.⁷⁹ Such extreme climatic conditions never seemed to impede his professional talents, however. One particularly flattering journalist called it “an intellectual delight to hear him sum up the facts of even the most commonplace case”, having as he did a “wonderfully clear-seeing eye which enabled him to take the most tangled mess of facts and sort and arrange them so that...everything was made clear”.⁸⁰ With a gift for a well-ordered summation and an easy authority honed over decades presiding, Justice Hawkins reads in newspaper coverage like a real-life Justice Wargraves: Logical, commanding, brutal. Hawkins’s heavy-handed sentences (in tandem with a sadistic pleasure in announcing them only at the very end of deliberately tortuous speeches) earned him the nickname “Hanging Hawkins”.⁸¹ Had the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁷ The interesting stories about Hawkins abound, but this one feels absolutely necessary to include: “Sir Henry was once presiding over a long, tedious, and uninteresting trial, and was listening, apparently with great attention to a very long-winded speech from a learned counsel. After a while he made a pencil memorandum, folded it, and send it by the usher to the Q.C. in question, who, unfolding the paper, found these words:--‘Patience competition. Gold medal, Sir Henry Hawkins; honourable mention, Job’”. “Leaves the Bench”, *Daily Mail*, 21 December, 1898, 3.

⁷⁸ “Leaves the Bench”, *Daily Mail*, 21 December, 1898, 3.

⁷⁹ Another amusing Hawkins anecdote: “On one occasion a person summed as a juryman applied to his Lordship to be excused attending, pleading deafness. “You may go,” whispered Sir Henry. “Thank you, my Lord,” was the instant reply. At the express wish of the judge he was retained on active service”. “Stories and Sayings of Judge Hawkins”, *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 December, 1898, 2.

⁸⁰ “Leaves the Bench”, *Daily Mail*, 21 December, 1898, 3.

⁸¹ Herbert Stephen, “Hawkins, Henry, Baron Ramptom”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September, 2004.

brothers hoped for reprieve in the form of a sympathetic judge, they would not find it in him, and certainly not for their particular crime, which Hawkins considered “one of the most serious known to criminal law”.⁸²

The crime, of course, was extortion. Some newspapers reported that the brothers had been charged with multiple offenses – potentially “sending threatening letters to women with the object of extracting money from them” and “obtaining the money by false pretenses” – though their Old Bailey record describes their charge only as “extortion” for “feloniously sending to Kate Clifford a letter demanding money from her, under the threat of exposing her for taking certain drugs when with child, to procure her miscarriage”.⁸³ The Old Bailey entry’s unusual and explicit reference to induced miscarriage speaks to how conspicuously absent abortion is elsewhere: Not only does this straightforward language lack the euphemistic gentility that would plague newspaper coverage, it also serves as a subtle but crucial reminder that the Chrimes brothers were not criminal abortionists, and that abortion was not on trial.

In fact, abortion was seldom on trial. In early modern England, religious objection to abortion was largely subsumed within a greater preoccupation with illegitimacy and aimed to regulate abortion primarily in extra-marital contexts.⁸⁴ Intra-marital abortions were all but invisible to the legal system: “crime was something that happened in the public sphere: it injured one of the king’s subjects and it disrupted the king’s peace. Intra-marital, self-induced abortion did not fit this paradigm”.⁸⁵ In the rare instances in which abortion was tried, it usually came about when something had gone seriously wrong: Brought “most often through the actions of the

⁸² “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 21 December, 1898, 2; “A Foul Gang”, *The Dover Express*, 23 December 1898, 3.

⁸³ “Chrimes and Charges”, *The Glasgow Herald*, 17 December, 1898, 4; “The Blackmailing Case”, *The Belfast News-Letter*, 17 December, 1898, 3; “Central Criminal Court”, *The Morning Post*, 17 December, 1898, 8.

⁸⁴ Spivack, “To Bring Down the Flowers”, 110.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

victims or their relatives, not by the actions of the state”, an abortion trial resembled less a crime punished by state authority than a modern tort.⁸⁶

The 1803 Ellenborough Act that made abortion at any stage of pregnancy a crime did not drastically increase the rate of abortion trials.⁸⁷ Attributable in part to “the difficult nature of abortion cases (there was usually no complainant, for example)”, following decades witnessed “few indictments and even fewer convictions for abortion (throughout the century there were rarely more than 15 persons, and frequently many fewer, held for trial in any single year)”.⁸⁸ As moral outrage over abortion replaced moral outrage over infanticide in the last quarter of the century, criminal prosecution began to increase: Of the 78 abortion trials held at the Old Bailey in the nineteenth century, 6 were held in the first half (resulting in only 3 convictions), and 47 were held in the last two decades.⁸⁹

The Chrimes trial, then, occurred within a juridical culture only very recently concerned with the illegality of abortion. By contrast, as has been shown in recent work on the prosecution of same-sex intimacy during this same period, extortion was a crime that had preoccupied the English legal system for decades, heavily censured even when the behavior or act under threat of exposure was widely understood to be “unnatural and immoral”.⁹⁰ Understanding these proceedings historically as a case built against would-be abortionists, then, is a dangerous misreading. Not only was the crime at the heart of the case was a *financial* one, but also the brothers were well aware that their product was wholly ineffectual, shielding them from liability

⁸⁶ Spivack, “To Bring Down the Flowers”, 138.

⁸⁷ Sauer, “Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, 84.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹⁰ David Orr, “‘The Foul Conspiracy to Screen Salisbury and Sacrifice Morton’: A Microhistory of Extortion, Resistance and Same-Sex Intimacy in Early Nineteenth-Century London”, *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* (Wiley-Blackwell: 2018), 581.

under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which required “*intent* to procure the miscarriage of a woman, whether she be or be not with child”.⁹¹

One cannot help but be impressed (and slightly amused) by the commitment of the trial’s language – both in court and in coverage – to evading the nitty-gritty of abortion, which could not have been more peripheral to the case had the accused been selling faulty cough drops. Hawkins suggested as much, when, upon being told that the pills “proved to be harmless” incited laughter with his observation that the same “might be said of a good many bottles of medicine”.⁹² Equally telling was Hawkins’s decision to read a small number of response letters to the blackmail threats, even though he had not thought it “necessary to outrage private feeling...by reading the letters received in answer to the *advertisements*”.⁹³ The issue was the blackmail, which could be proven without explicit reference to the ugly details of the personal information being held ransom.

Newspapers, for their part, fancied themselves bound by a certain standard of linguistic delicacy – a delicacy whose ubiquity is both an important attribute of the journalism that produced it, and a tip-off to that journalism’s undependability.⁹⁴ Relying heavily on these published accounts for primary source material, as this paper does, requires a brief

⁹¹ Emphasis added, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/section/58>.

⁹² “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 17 December, 1898, 7.

⁹³ Emphasis added: “Blackmail Trial”, *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 December, 1898, 5.

⁹⁴ The publications following the Chrimes trial were varied geographically, from *The Dundee Courier* in Scotland to *The Hampshire Telegraph* and *The Devon and Exeter Gazette* in the south of England, from *The Isle of Man Times* to *The Belfast News-Letter* (and even the all-Welsh *Y Genedl Gymreig*). They were also aimed at diverse audiences: *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, for instance, was a radical Sunday paper catering to politically democratic “lower to lower-middle classes”. *The Standard*, by contrast, was “staunchly conservative”, with a reputation for its coverage of the arts and foreign events. Similarly, *The Morning Post* – the last of the London papers to reduce its price to a penny – concerned itself with “the aristocratic and the wealthy”, whereas *The Daily News* was the first daily newspaper to “circulate widely among workingmen”. The Chrimes’ audience was widened further still by coverage in sensational and entertaining illustrated papers like *Illustrated Police News* and *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*.

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/reynoldss-newspaper>;

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/london-evening-standard>;

<https://www.bartleby.com/224/0409.html>; https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/gale-us-en/primary-sources/intl-gps/intl-gps-essays/full-ghn-contextual-essays/ghn_essay_bln_king3_website.pdf

acknowledgement of the sensationalized nature of the press: These articles do not present an impartial and objective record of the trial, and that is why they are valuable. As Judith Walkowitz has illustrated, late-Victorian London's newspapers – and particularly W. T. Stead's "New Journalism" – found remarkable success "catering to many different reading publics" through a cunning synthesis of investigative pretenses, politicized moral crusades, and melodramatic rhetoric.⁹⁵ A precipitous drop in price following the 1861 repeal of the paper tax had brought daily newspapers within the financial reach of a dramatically expanding audience of "common readers".⁹⁶ The revolutionary potential of this increasingly literate mass public naturally carried with it a host of new social, economic, and sexual anxieties, which were expressed and contested through the print culture that had engendered them. Feeding as it did into this charged, multidimensional journalistic atmosphere, then, the press coverage of the Chrimes trial proves to be a tricky historical source base and must be read with a healthy dose of mistrust. Taking these accounts at their word would be a mistake – luckily enough, their thorough commitment to linguistic ambiguity would make that impossible from the start.

The victims were almost never "pregnant" or "with child" – and, obviously, the historian should not hold her breath for anything close to "judiciously managing family size" or "asserting bodily autonomy". Instead, "certain females" were "in an unfortunate position", "in trouble", desirous of something that would "speedily relieve them".⁹⁷ Further, the brothers' business was so unspeakable as to sound totally innocuous, described as "advertising medicines for women"; for a reader insufficiently versed in the art of insinuation, the crime must have appeared to be

⁹⁵ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 191.

⁹⁶ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 354-355.

⁹⁷ "Central Criminal Court", *The Standard*, 17 December, 1898, 7; "Trading on Women's Secrets", *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 25 December, 1898, 5; "The Abominable Blackmailing Case", *The Illustrated Police News*, 31 December, 1898, 2.

flagrant marketing to a female demographic.⁹⁸ And while their extortion scheme – trading as it did in female “secrets” and “unpleasant disclosures” – was self-evidently an affront to respectable society, the business itself was of “nefarious character” for more pressing reasons than just its association with female troubles.⁹⁹ Although promising “the creation of a certain result” – in the words of one particularly hard-hitting journalist – the pills were offensive because useless, incapable of doing “what was stated”, whatever that was.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the court seemed more outraged at the pills’ ineffectiveness than their purpose. And, ironically, the pervasive anxieties surrounding commercial deception and consumer vulnerability meant that, in essence, the brothers were criminal because they did *not* provide abortions.

Nowhere is this more observable than in Hawkins’s exchange with Richard during his testimony. When asked why he had not chosen to use his real name, Richard explained “Well, it was not a very nice business was it?” “I should think it was not”, replied Hawkins, “I think it was a horrible business...inviting people to purchase those quack medicines which as we have heard were not calculated to bring about the very thing they were desired to do”, thereby getting “those shillings from those miserable wretched women under false pretenses”.¹⁰¹ Time and again Hawkins expresses a similar sentiment, saying that if an advertised medicine promised “certain consequences, while the medicine was useless for that purpose, and harmless, the fraud thus perpetrated was of the most cruel kind”.¹⁰² He admonished the brothers for knowing “perfectly well that the medicine was incapable of producing the results which [they] promised”, and

⁹⁸ “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 17 December, 1898, 7.

⁹⁹ “The Blackmailing of Women”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 21 December, 1898, 3; “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 17 December, 1898, 7; “Blackmail Trial”, *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 December, 1898, 5.

¹⁰⁰ “Trading on Women’s Secrets”, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 25 December, 1898, 5; “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 21 December, 1898, 2.

¹⁰¹ “Blackmail Trial”, *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 December, 1898, 5.

¹⁰² “Blackmail Trial”, *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 December, 1898, 5.

lamented that “those poor women were completely throwing their money away”.¹⁰³ Had this trial really been about abortion, one would expect the judge to interpret the exchange between the brothers and their customers as something far more morally fraught than a particularly egregious case of false advertising. Instead, Hawkins was sympathetic to the women as consumers who did not get their money’s worth. In fact, Hawkins’s most explicit – and yet not at all explicit – reference to abortion came in his summation, when he reminded the jury to consider that “under the law any woman who took a drug or did an act for the purpose of preventing the operation of natural causes in certain cases, was liable to penal servitude for life”, asking them to “draw their own conclusions as to the potency of [such] a threat”.¹⁰⁴ For Hawkins, abortion was relevant only insofar as it spoke to the emotional distress the women must have felt upon receiving the letters. Prosecuting counsel evidently agreed, even suggesting that the pills’ ineffectiveness also exonerated the women, who “had been taken in by the prisoners’ pretensions” and “frightened into believing that they had committed a crime” when, in fact, “in most of the cases all that could be said against the women was that they had given way to their fears”.¹⁰⁵

That the court was primarily concerned with extortion and fraud – *not* the immorality of abortion – is significant because it demands a shift in the scope of victimhood. References to the poor victims were ubiquitous, and most parties involved seemed to feel genuine sympathy for the plight of the women. But fraud and extortion were crimes to which any individual, regardless of gender, could fall prey. “Beyond all question”, asserted Hawkins, “to write a letter to *a man* or a woman threatening to accuse them of a criminal offence which might, by law...be visited by a

¹⁰³ “The Blackmailing Case”, *Leamington Spa Courier*, 24 December, 1898, 7.

¹⁰⁴ “The Blackmailing Case”, *The Manchester Weekly Times*, 23 December, 1898, 3.

¹⁰⁵ “Blackmailing Women”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 December, 1898, 9.

sentence of penal servitude for life, was calculated to create terror and alarm”.¹⁰⁶ For “one to trade on another *man’s* wickedness”, he continued, “to make *him* the victim of extortion, was in the last degree antagonistic to the interest of justice and antagonistic to the interests of the public”.¹⁰⁷ This anxiety, as McLaren has noted, over the universal threat of extortion, was born in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the middle class became increasingly invested in maintaining a distinction between public and private spheres.¹⁰⁸ As “the importance of sexual respectability” grew, an individual’s reputation became yet another victim of nineteenth-century commodification, requiring protection in the public sphere that increasingly preoccupied Britain’s legal system.

The value assigned to respectability is also evident in the considerable attention paid to Kate Clifford’s husband, hinting at very real anxiety about how such criminality could adversely impact men. The “wife of a respectable man, living within the jurisdiction of this court—a highly respectable woman—had the misfortune to see one of the advertisements”: in the article’s estimation, the victimization of “the wife of a respectable man” takes priority over the victimization of “a highly respectable woman”.¹⁰⁹ It was good for everyone (except maybe Kate) that “the husband, into whose hands the letter addressed to his wife fell, like the respectable and sensible man he undoubtedly was” took the letter to police.¹¹⁰

Hawkins’s two-hour summation, given December 20, similarly downplayed Kate’s victimhood: the “wife of a respectable man”, having been “disappointed in the medicine” she received from the accused, “wrote to say so, whereupon she was recommended to try a box at

¹⁰⁶ Emphasis added: “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 21 December, 1898, 2; “A Foul Gang”, *The Dover Express*, 23 December, 1898, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Emphasis added: “Central Criminal Court”, *The Standard*, 21 December, 1898, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Angus McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 277.

¹⁰⁹ “The Abominable Blackmailing Case”, *The Illustrated Police News*, 31 December, 1898, 2.

¹¹⁰ “The Abominable Blackmailing Case”, *The Illustrated Police News*, 31 December, 1898, 2.

double the price, so as to prevent the possibility of failure”, but to no avail.¹¹¹ “Still no good was accomplished, and the lady abandoned then all further thought of the matter”, said Hawkins (though one wonders how she made it through the next seven months without giving the matter a second thought).¹¹² The jury retired at 5:12 in the evening, tasked with determining the guilt of a man charged with a crime that menaced “every human being in the country” (which, then, *could not be* abortion), returning with a guilty verdict less than forty-five minutes later.¹¹³

As fate would have it, this case would close the prodigious career of Justice Hawkins, who submitted his resignation on the final day of the trial. With “the keenness of a junior whose reputation belongs to the future”, Hawkins must have relished the opportunity to hand down one final sentence before the packed courtroom in which he had “been so often called upon to assume the black cap in passing sentence of death”.¹¹⁴ Though this case did not warrant capital punishment, Hawkins would have been well within his authority to sentence the three men to the same lifetime of penal servitude with which they threatened over 8,000 women (and inconvenienced a number of husbands). Perhaps it was the sentimentality of it all that inspired Hawkins to uncharacteristically “err on the side of mercy”, sentencing Richard and Edward to twelve years, and Leonard to seven, before “rising from his seat...and, with grace and dignity, bow[ing] himself into private life”.¹¹⁵ Not one to shy away from the histrionics of a Victorian courtroom, Richard swooned.¹¹⁶

The conspicuous absence of explicit reference to or moral dismay over abortion should

¹¹¹ “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8.

¹¹² “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8.

¹¹³ “The Blackmailers”, *The Dundee Courier*, 21 December, 1898, 5; “Blackmail Trial”, *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 24 December, 1898, 5.

¹¹⁴ “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8.

¹¹⁵ “The Blackmailing Plot”, *The Morning Post*, 21 December, 1898, 7; “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8.

¹¹⁶ “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8.

give pause to historians looking to insert the trial into narratives of abortion and contraception. Further, the unexpected *presence* of consideration for men as potential victims of these distinctly financial crimes suggests we might do well to investigate the trial against a backdrop of the gendered anxieties of consumerism, or the commodification of medical services. This is not to say that the Chrimes trial cannot tell us anything about abortion, but those most qualified to speak publicly on the subject were never given the opportunity.

Information gleaned from newspaper reports on the anonymous women called to testify is unsurprisingly scant. Only one was unmarried.¹¹⁷ Her story can be rudimentarily pieced together from different accounts.¹¹⁸ Working as a domestic servant, the “young” single woman suspected pregnancy and sent 4s 6d to Lady Montrose in October of 1897, to “no effect”. She sent a further 9s for a larger box, which similarly had no effect. One report even suggests she had sent off to other companies for medicine at the same time – to no effect.¹¹⁹ Increasingly anxious, she wrote directly to Lady Montrose herself (“Dear Madame...”), explaining in the letter – which was produced at trial but not read aloud at Muir’s request – that she was “only a poor servant girl and had left her place” and needed help.¹²⁰ After receiving a reply, reported in certain accounts as instructions and in others as further promotional material, she disregarded it, maybe even throwing it in the fire. All accounts explained she was not pregnant, though it is unclear if that had always been the case. One of the married women testified that, after sending 2s 6d and another 10s 6d after the first product failed, she also wrote a letter to Lady Montrose.¹²¹ With a

¹¹⁷ “The Alleged Blackmailing”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 28 November, 1898, 4.

¹¹⁸ “Victims of Blackmailers”, *The Daily Mail*, 29 November, 1898, 3; “The Charge of Blackmailing Women”, *The Standard*, 29 November, 1898, 6; “The Alleged Blackmailing”, *The Gloucester Citizen*, 28 November, 1898, 4; “The Charge of Extorting Money”, *The Times*, 29 November, 1898, 3.

¹¹⁹ “The Alleged Blackmailing of Women”, *The Manchester Weekly News*, 2 December, 1898, 3.

¹²⁰ “The Extraordinary Blackmailing Case”, *The Illustrated Police News*, 3 December, 1898, 8.

¹²¹ “The Charge of Blackmailing Women”, *The Standard*, 29 November, 1898, 6; “Great Blackmailing Case”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 5; “Blackmailing Scandal”, *The Tamworth Herald*, 3 December, 1898, 6.

husband reported variously (and tellingly) as “a working man” and “a poor man”, she was still pregnant and out of money.¹²²

It is important to keep in mind that the information above amounts to renderings, doubly translated by the prosecution in the trial proceedings, and then again by reporters in newspaper coverage. Even the astonishingly rare “direct” quotes available were made accessible to us because they had been strategically picked from thousands of letters and read aloud by male prosecutors or the male judge. More than one account noted the striking discord between the voice of the judge and the words he spoke: “The naiveté and simplicity of the moving phraseology of the writer, and the quaint conclusion, in the mouth of the Judge acquired the spirit, as well as the form, of a little child’s prayer: ‘I will promise I will never do wrong any more, for Christ’s sake, Amen’”.¹²³ The second letter read by Hawkins, which arrived with two guineas and the request for “the paper which you hold against me”, is more difficult to patronize, ending “If my mistress knew, I should lose my situation”.¹²⁴

These paragraphs represent the extent of our knowledge about the women for whom this trial *truly was* about abortion. The historian can tell you about Richard’s tattoos, Mathews’ dramatics, and Hawkins’ dog, but very little about the thousands of nameless women for whom the trial was ostensibly held. The next section is a preliminary – and wholly insufficient – effort to piece together the life of Kate Clifford, the only real *lady* in this story.

¹²² “Great Blackmailing Case”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November, 1898, 5; *The Herald*, 12/3. “Blackmailing Scandal”, *The Tamworth Herald*, 3 December, 1898, 6.

¹²³ “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8; “Central Criminal Court, Dec. 20”, *The Times*, 21 December, 1898, 12.

¹²⁴ “The Resignation of Mr. Justice Hawkins”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December, 1898, 7-8. This witnesses’ anxiety would not have been misplaced. As noted by Carolyn Steedman, there was an established legal precedent, cited into the nineteenth century, “that convinced servants and their employers, for the next fifty years, that a pregnant, unmarried servant, ‘not guilty of any crime, or...misdemeanour at common law’, might be dismissed her place”. Carolyn Steedman, *History and the Law: A Love Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 148.

III

Less than a third of a mile north of Ludgate Circus, nestled beneath the shadow of St. Sepulchre's Church, lies the neighborhood of Snow Hill were, in 1688, author John Bunyan died in a friend's residence at the convergence of Snow Hill Street and Cock Lane.¹²⁵ Until its demolition in 1868 (to make room for the Holborn Viaduct), the Saracen's Head could be found on the north side of the road, known for frequently hosting seventeenth-century diarist Samuel Pepys, eighteenth-century satirist Jonathan Swift, and nineteenth-century novelist Charles Dickens. "Snow Hill. The name is such a good one", Dickens wrote in *Nicholas Nickleby*, focusing his description of the neighborhood on Newgate, the most notorious of London prisons (and gallows), located just a block away:



Figure 4 Snow Hill from Charles Booth's Map of London

There, at the very core of London, in the heart of its business and animation, in the midst of a whirl of noise and motion...stands Newgate; and in that crowded street on which it frowns so darkly...scores of human beings, amidst a roar of sounds to which even the tumult of a great city is nothing, four, six, or eight strong men at a time, have been hurried violently and swiftly from this world.¹²⁶

That Kate's story should pick up here – on 18 King Street, in the middle of Snow Hill – is rather ironic. To understand the crime for which Kate was *not* prosecuted, we start at the Newgate gallows; to rectify Kate's silence, we find ourselves on the stomping ground of some of the most verbose men in English history.

¹²⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 138.

¹²⁶ Charles Dickens, *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1916), 27.

The literary history of Snow Hill is worth keeping in mind, however: Reconstructing Kate's personal history is also, in some ways, an act of fiction. The dearth of primary sources regarding the contraceptive practices of the working classes has severely restricted historians and compelled them to be creative in interpreting the archival silence of these women by contextualizing it with eugenicist propaganda, middle-class birth control literature, and population census data, to name only a few approaches.¹²⁷ With the exception of twentieth-century oral histories and the very rare female autobiography, few historical accounts of working-class contraception and abortion are supported without mitigation by non-working-class perspectives.¹²⁸ It is necessary to remember, then, that these histories may not fully reflect the lived experiences of a particularly elusive historical demographic. Inversely, the lived experience of one woman, one fraction of that demographic, may be exceptional. Even if that is the case, and Kate is not representative of the large group of working-class women to whom she belonged, she was *made* to be so as the trial's only named victim, sacrificing her privacy and jeopardizing her reputation in the interests of thousands of other women. Making no effort to understand Kate on her own terms is a poor way to express the gratitude she's owed by historians, who are complicit in her absence so long as we know her best as "the wife of a respectable man". Making that effort, though, requires some imagination – which would not be out of place in Snow Hill.

Kate's first confirmed appearance in the historical record – composed, in this case, of national census documents and parish records – comes with her wedding on Christmas Day, 1883. Twenty-two-year-old Kate Hughes married then-clerk William Jarson Clifford (a native of

¹²⁷ See Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1990); Ittmann, *Work, Gender, and Family in Victorian England*; Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists* (New York: New Press, 1995), 52; Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil*; Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex*; Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain*; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹²⁸ Though focusing primarily on the 20th century, Kate Fisher's remarkable collection of interviews is an exception, underscoring the power of privileging working-class voices. Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage*.

Bermondsey born to an Irish laborer) in All Saints' Church in the South London district of Newington. Her next verifiable appearance comes in the 1901 census, where she is listed for the first time at 18 King Street, living with her husband, daughter Lilian Muriel (15), and three sons, Frank Fitzgerald (16), Gerald William (7), and Maurice Edward (2), whose birth in May of 1898 coincides with the pregnancy Kate sought to terminate with Lady Montrose's pills in the fall of 1897. Additional insights into Kate's life can be gleaned from the census: by this point, Kate was a "housekeeper" and William was a warehouseman. Her eldest son Frank was an apprentice, and, remarkably, her daughter was still in school. Significantly, her third child, Gerald – born in Yorkshire in the spring of 1893 (a fact that will become important shortly) – had a checkmark in the characteristically Victorian census column dedicated to the "(1) Deaf and Dumb, (2) Blind, (3) Lunatic, (4) Imbecile, feeble-minded", though no details regarding his disability are given.

In 1911, Kate was still living on King Street with William (now a warehouse manager), Gerald (who, interestingly, was working as a clerk and now listed on the census without a checkmark in the "Infirmity" column), and a four-year-old granddaughter Kathleen, the child of Lilian who by now was married with five living children. From this census, we also learn that Kate had actually given birth to eight living children, five of whom had died by 1911 (including Maurice, who appears only once in the historical record during a two-week stay in 1901 in South Western Fever Hospital, one specializing in infectious diseases, before passing away in late summer of 1905 at the age of 7). This knowledge helps explain the eight-year age difference between Lilian and Gerald – instead of representing a period free from pregnancy, it is likely that gap suggests the birth of one or more children who died in infancy. This census also provides another piece of information: Kate was born in Bourn, Cambridgeshire, in or around 1861.

Available baptismal documents from Bourn and surrounding parishes tell a different story, however, containing no record of a Kate (or variation) born within a ten-year range of 1861.

While this detail may seem negligible, it is tied to the absence of any record of Kate Clifford in the 1891 census, and to the anomalous nature of Gerald's Yorkshire birth into a family whose other children – both older and younger – were all born in London. Though requiring some degree of speculation, I believe Kate also went by “Eliza”.

William Jarson Clifford (rather *unlike* the “respectable and sensible man he undoubtedly was”) appears in the 1891 census as a prisoner in Kingston upon Hull prison in Yorkshire.¹²⁹ Although the crime that landed him there is unknown, we do learn that at this point he was working as a “Dockers Union Clerk”. At the same time, nearly 200 miles away, the census – and no census before or after – records an “Eliza Clifford” living at the Hughes family residence in Islington, London, with her children Frank (6) and Lilian (5), whose respective ages align perfectly with Kate Clifford's Frank and Lilian. This Eliza Clifford, as well as multiple members of the Hughes family, was born in Bourn, Cambridgeshire in or around 1861. Although falling short of an absolute certitude, it seems highly probable that Eliza was Kate, returned to live with family in Islington while her husband served his prison time in Yorkshire, where she eventually met him upon his release and gave birth to Gerald shortly thereafter. Operating, then, under the assumption that the Kate Hughes who married William Clifford and the Eliza Clifford living with the Hughes family in 1891 are the same person, an even fuller picture of Kate emerges.

Eliza Ann Hughes was born in Caxton to David and Elizabeth Hughes in the late spring or early summer of 1861, and baptized in Bourn, Cambridgeshire, in August of the same year. David Hughes came from a large family of Cordwainers, and had himself taken up the profession

¹²⁹ “The Abominable Blackmailing Case”, *The Illustrated Police News*, 31 December, 1898, 2.

of boot-making by his marriage to Elizabeth sometime before 1861. Between 1881 and 1891, David and Elizabeth and a number of Eliza's siblings moved roughly fifty miles from Cambridgeshire to Islington, though it seems possible that Eliza – who was listed in the 1871 census as living with a maternal aunt in Cambridgeshire, and was already married in London by 1883 – had moved to the city at an earlier point. The fact that the name “John Hughes” was recorded in the “Father” column of Kate's marriage certificate is not incompatible with this theory either: “Father” could be interpreted as “guardian”, and David Hughes's younger brother, who had left Cambridgeshire as a young man, was named John. (The same maternal aunt of Eliza's with whom she had earlier lived was also listed as a guest in the Hughes household in 1891, so it is not inconceivable that a significant subset of the Cambridgeshire family had migrated to London over the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth century).

The Clifford family took up residence on King Street sometime between 1893 and 1897, where Kate and William would live together until his death in late 1918 or early 1919. Kate was still there, living alone, until at least 1920, when she appears – for the last time – in the polling register for the district of Farringdon Without. The abrupt and rather unsatisfying end to this account of Kate's life is partly out of necessity and partly by design: My research is ongoing, but I am intent on avoiding constructing closure where there is none. What we know about Kate is dwarfed by what we do not know, and much of what is missing is likely permanently unrecoverable. It is also worth imagining anyway.

For example, we don't know exactly when or why Kate migrated to London, but she was certainly not alone: Between 1841 and 1901, as estimated by Jason Long, 3 million people (500,000 people per decade) migrated from rural England and Wales to towns.¹³⁰ As early as the

¹³⁰ Jason Long, “Rural-Urban Migration and Socioeconomic Mobility in Victorian Britain”, *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

eighteenth century, the “arrival in town of people born outside it” was an established “social experience of the inhabitants of the metropolis, reflected in novels, drama, poetry and paintings, as well as in the judicial and parochial archives”.¹³¹ This experience of displacement was heightened during Kate’s lifetime, a period when job prospects for women in rural settings steadily decreased, and the domestic service sector in urban centers absorbed a steady influx of migrant, female labor.¹³² Was Kate one of the many girls who, as Leonore Davidoff put it, “moved from paternal control, in their parents’ home, into service and then into her husband’s home – thus experiencing a lifetime of personal subordination in private homes”?¹³³ It seems highly possible, given that, by 1881, 1 in 15 Londoners was a servant.¹³⁴

Whether or not the experience of migration was lonely for Kate, whether or not she felt “lost in that human flotsam and jetsam” of the ever-expanding city, all young migrants must have felt to some degree the loss of the “human personalities” for which they were known in their home communities, becoming instead “ciphers, an economic commodity which was bought and sold according to the market price of labor”.¹³⁵ And if people could be commodities, abortion certainly could: Kate’s migration not only speaks to the size and vulnerability of the demographic targeted by the Chrimes brothers, but also to the expanding jurisdiction of a market economy capable of assigning a price to almost anything.

We don’t know exactly how or where Kate and William met, though their marriage certificate tells us they were neighbors on Faraday Street in Surrey, and we don’t know how they

¹³¹ Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 92.

¹³² Long, “Rural-Urban Migration and Socioeconomic Mobility in Victorian Britain”, 17.

¹³³ Leonore Davidoff, “Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England”, *Journal of Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 409.

¹³⁴ Davidoff, “Mastered for Life”, 409.

¹³⁵ Nicholas Hans, *New Trends in English Education in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 211.

felt about each other, or if William was a good husband. For Kate to have had 8 children born alive (not including still births or miscarriages) by 1911 at the latest, it seems unlikely that William was a particularly thoughtful or active partner in family planning.

We have no insight into the other forms of contraception, if any, the Cliffords used, but might reasonably suppose their habits conformed to popular working-class practices. Even when the price of mechanical contraception (diaphragms, cervical caps, douches, syringes, etc.) was not prohibitive, the “standards of hygiene” demanded to use them safely and effectively were often hard to meet in working-class households, where running water and privacy were rare.¹³⁶ The price and association of condoms with venereal diseases and prostitution also contributed to the popularity of abstinence, withdrawal, and abortion.¹³⁷ It is not inconceivable that Kate had ended a pregnancy before: Abortion was a common and largely morally unremarkable practice among working-class women, lacking the associations with unmarried girls and illegitimate pregnancies it has to this day.¹³⁸ Further, many women believed in a difference between ending a pregnancy – which they understood to begin at quickening, or the fetus’s first movement – and maintaining regular menstruation.¹³⁹ Some women went so far as to establish a monthly routine of hot baths and gin to ensure their periods arrived on time. While the prevalence of abortion certainly speaks to the investment and agency of women in determining family size, it also indicates their vulnerability: The form of contraception within their control occurred after conception. Working-class women had some say over whether they *stayed* pregnant but were

¹³⁶ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, 153-154; Deborah Cohen, “Private Lives and Public Spheres: Marie Stopes, the Mothers’ Clinics and the Practice of Contraception”, *History Workshop*, No. 35 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); McLaren, *A History of Contraception*, 185.

¹³⁷ Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 189-190; John Peel, “The Manufacturing and Retailing of Contraceptives in England”, *Population Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1963), 115; Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage*, 138, 141; Ross, *Love and Toil*, 103; Gittins, *Fair Sex*, 159.

¹³⁸ Beier, *For Their Own Good*, 245; Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage*.

¹³⁹ McLaren, “Abortion in England, 1890-1914”, 396.

frequently at the mercy of their husbands as to whether they got pregnant in the first place.

Kate's marriage was a succession of constant pregnancies from the start: Their first child, Frank, was born September 28, 1884 – nine months and three days after their wedding.

This was by no means an uncommon experience for women. Kate herself came from a large family. Her daughter Lilian, married in the winter of 1904 at the age of eighteen to an “Inspector of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals”, had already given birth to six children by the age of twenty-five (one of whom had passed away before the 1911 census). The implications of these large families and successive pregnancies (in addition to the presence of the Hughes family – if indeed it is Kate's – in London by 1891) complicate our understanding of the strength and accessibility of female knowledge networks: Kate became a Montrose customer while multiple generations of female family members lived in town, and Lilian was either uninterested in or unsuccessful at limiting pregnancy.

And Lilian and Kate were not alone, as the collection of 160 letters on maternity published in 1915 by the Women's Co-Operative Guild attests, in which the conditions of motherhood in the working-class households of Kate's generation are laid bare, from untreated uterine prolapses, to unaided childbirth, to the emotional and physical trauma of decades of constant pregnancy (“As soon as I was over one trouble, it was all started over again”).¹⁴⁰ We might imagine Kate's experience of motherhood to resemble, at least in part, those described by other mothers of large families. While acknowledging that her husband's 30s weekly wage kept her from being “the worst-placed woman by a long way”, one mother of eight explained why she, like Kate, “resorted to drugs trying to prevent or bring about a slip”.¹⁴¹ “No one who has not

¹⁴⁰ *Maternity: Letters from Working-Women Collected by the Women's Co-Operative Guild* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1915), 61.

¹⁴¹ *Maternity: Letters from Working-Women Collected by the Women's Co-Operative Guild*, 38.

been placed in a similar condition”, she wrote, “can realise how horrible it is”.¹⁴² Abortion is presented by the Guild – who understood it to be an “evil” induced by poverty – as a problematic but not inconceivable recourse for women burdened by chronic material want.¹⁴³ It is worth noting, though, that abortion in the letters themselves is often tied to the emotional and personal costs of motherhood: One mother of three recounted nearly “los[ing] hope and faith in everyone. I felt that even the baby could not make up for the terrible strain I had undergone, and at that time I could fully enter into the feelings of those women who take drugs to prevent birth”.¹⁴⁴

We do not know the extent to which Kate would identify with these portrayals of motherhood; we know nothing about the emotional and psychic motivations behind Kate’s decision. We do know something about the material and physical realities she faced, however, and they say a great deal. When she placed her order for Lady Montrose’s pills in the fall of 1897, experiencing what was likely at least her fifth or sixth pregnancy, she would have been 36, an age which today would place her in the “advanced maternal age” category associated with higher-risk pregnancies. She would have had two teenagers and one four-year-old with some form of disability, for whom she had been the sole caregiver for at least one significant stretch of time during her husband’s imprisonment. It is probable that, by this point, she had already lost one or more children, who did not live long enough to appear in government or parish records. A Dickensian imagination is not required to sympathize with the stakes of yet another pregnancy, another mouth to feed until another tragic death. Maurice could not have been the only Chrimes baby who did not survive his childhood. No amount of imagination, however, can capture the tragedy and cruelty of Kate’s story, multiplied by 12,000. The other women at the heart of this

¹⁴² Ibid., 38.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

history – their lives, their experiences, their children – constitute a truly unfathomable absence.

IV

Around the time a final draft of this paper came together, U.S. Senate Bill 8 went into effect in Texas following a contentious 4-5 Supreme Court ruling. Banning almost all abortions after six weeks, the Bill does more than effectively outlaw abortion for a huge majority of Texans. Subsection 171.208 awards “statutory damages in an amount of not less than \$10,000 for each abortion” to any “claimant [who] prevails in an action brought under this section”.¹⁴⁵ In 1898, an enterprising individual looking to make two guineas worming his way into the reproductive lives of strangers had to at least brave the possibility of conviction himself. In 2021, no such bravery is required. The business of abortion (selling it, lobbying against it, reporting it) remains lucrative, even as the accessibility of the practice deteriorates.

Abortion has proven a particularly troublesome subject for historians, in no small part due to “the difficulty, if not impossibility, of establishing the incidence of acts which were illegal and therefore hidden from public scrutiny”.¹⁴⁶ Even though conclusions regarding a practice whose extent is “impossible to estimate” are necessarily finite and tentative, they are worth drawing (and redrawing), anyway.¹⁴⁷ The businessman, the legislator, the lawyer, and “the successful blackmailer [with] an income for life” – whether he be a Texan or an Englishman – are newcomers (*irregularities*, even) in a history dominated by women.¹⁴⁸ Privileging the perspectives of Kate Clifford and the countless women for whom the *practice* of abortion was a matter of great personal significance is our best defense against allowing the *business* of abortion to overwhelm the narratives that continue to determine access to reproductive health.

¹⁴⁵ SB 8.

¹⁴⁶ Angus McLaren, “Abortion in England”, 380.

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Knight, “Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England”, 57.

¹⁴⁸ “Central Criminal Court, Dec. 19”, *The Times*, 20 December, 1898, 9.

Bibliography

Selection of Primary Media Sources

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette	Glasgow Herald	Nottinghamshire Guardian
Belfast News-Letter	Gloucester Citizen	Pall Mall Gazette
Bristol Mercury	Grantham Journal	Penny Illustrated Paper
Bury and Norwich Post	Hampshire/Portsmouth Telegraph	Reynold's Newspaper
Chelmsford Chronicle	Hull Daily Mail	Royal Cornwall Gazette
Cheltenham Chronicle	Illustrated Police News	Stamford Mercury
Cornishman	Ipswich Journal	Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette
Daily Mail	Isle of Man Times	Tamworth Herald
Daily News	Leamington Spa Courier	The Standard
Daily Telegraph	Leed's Times	The Times
Dover Express	Leicester Chronicle	Western Gazette
Dundee Courier	Morning Post	Western Mail
Edinburgh Evening News	Morpeth Herald	Whitstable Times and
Exeter and Plymouth Gazette	Newcastle Courant	Herne Bay Herald
Genedl	North-Eastern Daily Gazette	Yorkshire Evening Post

Census Primary Sources

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1871*

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881*

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891*

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1901*

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1911*

England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

Secondary Articles

- Alexander, Sally, Anna Davin, and Eve Hostettler. "Labouring Women: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm". *History Workshop*, No.8. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- August, Andrew. "How Separate A Sphere? Poor Women and Paid Work in Late-Victorian London". *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 19. 1994.
- Brown, P. S. "Female Pills and the Reputation of Iron as an Abortifacient". *Medical History*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 1977.
- Cohen, Deborah A. "Private Lives in Public Spaces: Marie Stopes, the Mothers' Clinics and the Practice of Contraception". *History Workshop*, No. 35. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Davidoff, Leonore. "Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England". *Journal of Social History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Folbre, Nancy. "Of Patriarchy Born: The Political Economy of Fertility Decisions". *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2. Feminist Studies, Inc.: 1983.
- Forbes, Thomas R. "The Regulation of English Midwives in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries". *Medical History*, 1971.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about it". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No.1. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Gradwhol, Alex. "Herbal Abortifacients and their Classical Heritage in Tudor England". *Penn History Review*, Vol. 21, Issue 1. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013.
- Green, Monica. "Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe". *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 2. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Hamilton, Margaret. "Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act". *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 1978.
- Higgs, Edward and Amanda Wilkinson. "Women, Occupations and Work in the Victorian Censuses Revisited". *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 81. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Knight, Patricia. "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England". *History Workshop*, No. 4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Long, Jason. "Rural-Urban Migration and Socioeconomic Mobility in Victorian Britain". *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 65, No. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- McLaren, Angus. "Abortion in England, 1890-1914". *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4. Indiana University Press, 1977.

- Orr, David. “‘The Foul Conspiracy to Screen Salisbury and Sacrifice Morton’: A Microhistory of Extortion, Resistance and Same-Sex Intimacy in Early Nineteenth-Century London”. *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*. Wiley-Blackwell: 2018.
- Peel, John. “The Manufacture and Retailing of Contraceptives in England”. *Population Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 1963.
- Ross, Ellen. “‘Fierce Questions and Taunts’: Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914”. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3. Autumn, 1982.
- Sauer, R. “Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain”. *Population Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1. Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1978.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*”. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Spivack, Carla. “To ‘Bring Down the Flowers’: The Cultural Context of Abortion Law in Early Modern England”. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2007.
- Thornbury, Walter. “Ludgate Hill”. *Old and New London: Volume 1*. London: 1878, pp. 220-233. *British History Online*.

Secondary Books

- Ackroyd, Peter. *London: The Biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2000.
- Altick, Richard D. *The English Common Reader*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- Banks, J. A. *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.
- Bland, Lucy. *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*. New York: New Press, 1995.
- Booth, Charles. *Life and Labour of the People in London*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1904.
- Cook, Hera. *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Dickens, Charles. *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1916.
- Felstead, Sidney Theodore. *Sir Richard Muir: A Memoir of a Public Prosecutor*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1927.
- Fisher, Kate. *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Green, Shirley. *The Curious History of Contraception*. London: Ebury Press, 1971.

- Griffin, Emma. *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
- Hans, Nicholas. *New Trends in English Education in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.
- Himes, Norman E. and Vera C. Himes. *Birth Control for the British Working Classes: A Study of the First Thousand Cases to Visit an English Birth Control Clinic. Hospital Social Service*, XIX: 1929.
- Ittmann, Karl. *Work, Gender, and Family in Victorian England*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.
- Gittins, Diana. *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-39*. London: Hutchinson, 1982.
- Johnson, Jessica Marie. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- Light, Alison. *Common People: In Pursuit of My Ancestors*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Linebaugh, Peter. *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- McLaren, Angus. *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1990.
- McLaren, Angus. *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- McCray Beier, Lucinda. *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880-1970*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
- Muir, Sir Richard. *A Memoir of A Public Prosecutor*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1927.
- Riddle, John M. *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Rose, Sonya. *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Ross, Ellen. *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Steedman, Carolyn. *History and the Law: A Love Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

- Steedman, Carolyn. *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Szreter, Simon. *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- The Oxford Companion to British Railway History: From 1603 to the 1990s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Valenze, Deborah. *The First Industrial Woman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.