

**“Woman’s Special Enemy”:
Female Enmity in Criminal Discourse during the Long
Nineteenth Century**

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Abstract

The belief that women secretly hate other women is one with a long history. This article highlights the role that idea played in the myriad of literature produced about women of the “criminal classes” from the early Victorian period through to the end of the First World War, as interest in female crime and prostitution was at its height. The trope that women are each other’s worst enemies was evident in criminal discourse across transnational contexts; in particular, I explore how such narratives were received from the European and Anglo-American worlds and perpetuated in the Australian colonies during this period. It is shown that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators portrayed criminality as a moral contagion communicated by women – often deliberately and maliciously – to each other. The crimes most often associated with females were also depicted as being based upon the exploitation of women by other women. Descriptions of the female criminal persona emphasized their incapacity for friendship or suggested they were capable only of perverted interactions that tended towards mutual destruction. Moving across time and transnational contexts, various permutations of criminal discourses thus promoted an image in the popular imagination of female relationships as sites of danger and latent animosity, and moreover suggested that this reflected an underlying dynamic among women as a whole.

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When examining enmity, it is worthwhile considering its opposite, friendship, or as it is often described in Australia, mateship. Since the late nineteenth century, mateship has been coded in the Australian cultural imagination as an inherently masculine bond.¹ Cultural productions promoting mateship as part of the Australian legend in the 1890s did so using characters that were male. They were also usually criminals, with colonial writers romanticizing male convicts and bushrangers for courageously battling the authorities alongside their mates.² However, outside the annals of colonial literature female criminals also shared the types of devoted friendships considered emblematic of “mateship.” Archival

records show the term was used by nineteenth-century women offenders as they begged for mercy, money or drinks on behalf of female “mates”;³ that authorities employed the phrase to describe partnerships between women known to solicit, rob or live together;⁴ and that female prisoners even inscribed the word onto their flesh to commemorate their friendships.⁵ Such women though, did not enter the national consciousness as embodiments of mateship.⁶ Instead, as this article explores, the Australian colonies inherited a western tradition of diminishing and demonizing relationships between women, a discourse that became particularly virulent in discussions of female criminals during the long nineteenth century.

As V. A. C. Gatrell observes, crime was a growing subject of discussion during this period. Anxieties about industrialization’s breakdown of old communities and creation of new ones meant crime went from being a matter of relative indifference in the eighteenth century to one of the chief concerns of nineteenth-century policy-makers.⁷ It was also a topic of fascination to the general public. Various changes, including rising literacy rates, lead to the increased consumption of representations of crime through broadsheets, tabloids, novels, detective stories, plays, music, and, by the end of the century, film. Female crime, especially prostitution, was a particular concern. This was in part a response to the “widening freedom of action” for women brought by the political, social and economic transformations of the era, as well as to women’s advocacy for further equality.⁸ Apprehensions about women’s use of social networks to further this agenda perhaps also influenced sentiments regarding women’s relationships with each other.

While Victorians celebrated romantic friendships between women, female friendship was often a subject of scepticism, particularly in relation to women of the lower orders.⁹ This was displayed most palpably in representations of the relationships of criminal women, the destructive qualities of which were portrayed as proof that women in general were each other’s worst enemies. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this belief

permeated a number of discourses related to female morality and crime, including concerns over prostitution; women's attempts to control their own fertility; their involvement in working life; the rise of the social welfare movement and the figure of the juvenile delinquent; and the burgeoning scientific disciplines of eugenics, criminal anthropology and psychology. Historians have occasionally noted the misogynistic portrayal of female relationships in reference to these themes individually. However, lack of a sustained analysis across the totality of discussions has meant the extent of Victorian commentators' denigration of criminal women's relationships, and their preoccupation with them, has gone unrecognized.

This article highlights that preoccupation by examining the myriad of literature produced as interest in the figure of the prostitute and female criminal developed in the early Victorian period and intensified from the 1860s, before declining at the end of the First World War.¹⁰ Many of these texts emanated from overseas, but their ideologies were received and reproduced in Australia.¹¹ Local commentators constructed narratives to fit imported structures, and, along with visitors who published accounts of slum tours of antipodean cities, contributed colonial variations to discourses about women of the "criminal classes." Throughout this proliferation of writings, however, the message about women's relationships with each other remained unchanged.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century commentators repeatedly ascribed female deviance to women's relationships with other women, portraying criminality as a moral contagion communicated – often deliberately and maliciously – by bad company or corrupt family members. Female connections were further vilified by portraying the crimes most often associated with females as predicated upon the exploitation of women by other women. Descriptions of the female criminal persona emphasized their incapacity for friendship or suggested they were capable only of perverted interactions that tended towards mutual

destruction. Criminal discourses thus contributed to the construction of an image in the popular imagination of female relationships as sites of danger and latent animosity; a belief some feminists suggest continues to pervade society today.¹²

Moral Contamination

The physical pollution brought by industrialization ignited fears that this environmental corruption signalled a more widespread social decay, symbolized most poignantly by the diseased body of the prostitute.¹³ One of the first texts published as part of the nineteenth-century social exploration genre was a treatise on prostitution that appeared in 1837. Although the author, Doctor Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, had previously conducted research in the disease-infested sewers of Paris, he was initially reluctant to study a topic that exposed him to potential moral pollution. Parent-Duchâtelet was only enheartened to undertake his enquiry by the reflection that members of the “weaker” sex were able to perform charity work among fallen women and emerge unscathed.¹⁴ While contact with the degraded classes was seen to imperil both men and women, females were deemed in even greater danger of corruption due to their more impressionable natures.¹⁵ Moral contamination thus figured especially large in explanations of female crime and prostitution. Yet while women were considered more susceptible to contamination than men, they were also represented as more potent sources of contagion.¹⁶ A consolidated view emerged in scholarship produced around 1840 that women were not mere passive carriers of infection, but, as James Talbot suggested in *The Miseries of Prostitution*, possessed an innate desire “to allure others into the same unhallowed paths [as themselves].”¹⁷ Their favorite targets of corruption were said to be other women.¹⁸

This view was perpetuated in discussions of female criminality over the following decades throughout the European world. By 1876 it was even being voiced in the far-flung

Australian colonies by a member of the Melbourne police. “Women who had gone to the bad,” he affirmed, “were nearly always solicitous to secure the ruin of younger girls who came within their clutches.”¹⁹ While trepidations were also expressed about male youths being worsened by contact with hardened criminals, the actual desire to corrupt their own sex was understood as a peculiarly female failing. In 1887, Australian columnist John Stanley James declared that male criminals were not nearly as eager to introduce boys to crime as women were to initiate girls to vice.²⁰ Men who did adopt younger confederates were furthermore assumed to operate from the straightforward motivation of monetary gain, not from any deep-seated hatred of their own sex. When it came to women, however, most commentators regarded avarice as, at best, a partial explanation for their tendency to lead other females astray. Instead, female criminals were accused of harboring a jealousy and warped self-hatred that rendered other women, particularly the innocent and respectable, the “objects of their greatest antipathy.”²¹

The growing popularity of the social explorer genre brought increased attention to crime from the 1860s, as well as fresh viewpoints as a result of the prominent role assumed by doctors and scientists in the wake of the era’s intellectual advancements. Yet new fields of authority often simply incorporated the idea of female malevolence into their own perspectives. Women’s propensity to induce each other to crime was given a scientific rationale by the Italian father of criminal anthropology, Cesare Lombroso. He argued that centuries of competing for male attention in order to ensure their survival had instilled in women an “instinctive and implacable hostility” toward one another that inevitably underlay their relations.²² Despite being veiled in Darwinian semantics, the suggestion that the moral corruption of women was due to female vengefulness simply perpetuated another long-standing discourse that blamed women’s downfall on innate defects in the female character. Such reasoning continued to compete with more sympathetic views ushered in by religious

and women's groups in the late nineteenth century that recognized the importance of factors such as sexual exploitation and poverty.²³ An English prison chaplain who published his memoirs in 1890 claimed that when he began his work he had considered seduction and desertion the chief causes of prostitution, but had since discovered that "woman's special enemy was not so frequently a man but a member of her own sex."²⁴ In Australia too, it was asserted that men were "not so much to blame" for the social vice as women, who "never see innocence, but they wish to mar it."²⁵

Even feminist works produced well into the early twentieth century at times subordinated economic explanations for female criminality to allegations of evil promptings from other women. In 1916 suffragist Maude Royden postulated that such urgings might proceed from "kindness" on the part of women enjoying the financial rewards of prostitution and still unfamiliar with its hardships. However, she quickly followed up this progressive viewpoint with the more traditional observation that there existed among fallen women "the feeling...of the fox who has lost his tail and wants to get all the other foxes to have their tails cut off too."²⁶ Writing in 1913, American social-worker Jane Addams likewise asserted that though "a girl always prefers to think that economic pressure is the reason for her downfall," a more immediate cause was usually found in "the influence of evil companions."²⁷ Dwelling upon female culpability diverted attention from the role men played both as corrupting influences themselves and as the authors of social conditions that were unfavorable to women, concerns that were nevertheless being increasingly foregrounded by the late Victorian period. This shifting of blame likely contributed to the longevity and pervasiveness of narratives that figured female friends and family members as scapegoats for women's descent into delinquency.

Bad Company

In a nineteenth-century ballad on transportation the convict narrator explains her expulsion from England as the result of being “enticed by bad company.”²⁸ Social explorers repeatedly identified bad company not only as a common cause of the “social evil,” but of theft and juvenile delinquency.²⁹ The emergence of concerns about fallen women corrupting innocent girls in part reflects the increasing distinction of the category of adolescents as a vulnerable group in need of protection from the mid nineteenth century as middle-class values and family models became increasingly influential.³⁰ Following the promulgation of industrial school legislation in the Australian colonies in the 1860s, the phrase “bad company” was frequently cited by police to show why certain girls should be locked up.³¹ In this way, being found “in bad company” in itself came to be regarded as an offence. Contemporary criminological research shows social peers undoubtedly play a role in the likelihood of involvement in criminal behavior by both males and females.³² However, the ubiquitousness of the trope of women being corrupted by malign female friends in Victorian accounts of women’s deviance suggests an underlying contempt for female friendship.

Malicious friends were omnipresent in explanations of female crime not only as direct causes, but as facilitators behind other significant triggers identified by reformers. Even in narratives where men did receive blame for instigating women’s fall, other females were often portrayed assisting their seduction. In another instance of the rise of scientific explanations of criminality, William Sanger, the American Parent-Duchâtelet, argued that friendships with immoral women led to prostitution because companionship with females who had yielded to the sex instinct activated women’s usually dormant passions.³³ Literary explorations of urban slums more commonly portrayed girls negligently facilitating their companions’ ruin by promoting intercourse with the opposite sex during dubious social

outings permitted by the recreational culture of industrial cities.³⁴ In F. W. Robinson's 1864 novel *Memoirs of Jane Cameron, Female Convict*, the heroine's friend Mary Loggie – “anxious to see Jane as bad as herself” – thus fosters Jane's connection to a young thief during visits to a dancing-house.³⁵ Other narratives in which women encouraged female companions to drunkenness in order to prepare them as easy sexual conquests for male confederates likewise intimated corruption was malevolent and deliberate.³⁶

Drinking was another gateway to delinquency for which commentators indicted the influence of female friends. Hardened women were described taking with them on their “downward career” young girls whose only fault was that they were “pressured to take a glass” and rapidly found they could not resist temptation.³⁷ Some “for whom drink has no flavour without company” were thought to encourage other women in the habit from a simple desire for sociability;³⁸ but many were believed, like prostitutes, to be actuated by a need to make others as bad as themselves.³⁹ Colonial anti-Chinese sentiment meant opium was sometimes substituted for liquor in Australian narratives; in an 1895 novel set in Sydney the hero's wife blames her descent into prostitution on “a friend – at least she used to call herself by that sacred name – [who] initiated me into the intricacies of opium smoking.”⁴⁰ Alternatively, drinking was sometimes believed to lead the otherwise respectable woman into spaces where she formed “acquaintances among the depraved of her own sex,” following which she inevitably was induced to join their ranks.⁴¹

Love of finery was also a persistent explanation for female downfall.⁴² Colonial prosperity was said to have fostered a materialism that meant Australian girls possessed a particularly inordinate love of dress, contemporaries noting with disfavor that colonial girls were more likely to succumb to seduction through vanity than romantic passion.⁴³ This vanity was attributed to female competitiveness. In 1909 one Melbourne police detective asked to account for juvenile immorality suggested that an infectious spirit of rivalry meant girls did

not fall into immorality singly but as part of groups, as each turned to prostitution to “vie with the others in improving her appearance with paint, powder and furbelows.”⁴⁴ Others blamed friendships in which unprincipled companions encouraged girls to spend all their money on dress, then use their clothes to attract male attention in a sequence that eventually led to prostitution.⁴⁵ Sartorial enthrallment was also represented as a means by which girls were induced to contract unsavory friendships, with the *Queensland Figaro* observing in 1883 that girls in Brisbane often fell by taking up with well-dressed old school-mates who were “on the town.”⁴⁶

While some nineteenth-century commentators treated economic explanations of prostitution dismissively, the frustration caused by the necessity of having to work to avoid poverty was an accepted narrative in tales of women’s downward spiral.⁴⁷ Once again, the dangers of bad company played a part in these narratives. Released from the “protection of the home” to follow various occupations, one of the moral dangers to which industrialisation was believed to expose women was corruption by female co-workers.⁴⁸ Shop girls and seamstresses were recorded having been advised to “go wrong” by others engaged in the trades.⁴⁹ Factory girls were allegedly placed at risk by laboring alongside older, sexually-experienced women.⁵⁰ Forms of employment that lent themselves to prostitution, such as street-hawking and bar-work, were deemed dangerous not only because they subjected women to encounters with men in sexualized settings, but to contact with females who had possibly already fallen victim to these hazards.⁵¹ The sense of autonomy produced by earning their own money was furthermore said to entice women to leave the safety and discipline of home life to room with female friends, or spend their time socializing within dangerously liminal zones.⁵²

Supporter of England’s contagious diseases legislation William Acton feared that the “elbowing of vice and virtue” in urban spaces exposed susceptible females to the potentially

degrading sight of “the vicious and profligate sisterhood” freely enjoying amusements the working woman had to struggle to afford.⁵³ Australian writers echoed Acton’s concerns.⁵⁴ Local commentators also worried that colonial girls’ early physical maturation meant they enjoyed a dangerous freedom of movement within public entertainment arenas.⁵⁵ Not content with providing temptation from afar, prostitutes were described using recreational locales to make the acquaintance of respectable girls, and assuring them of the “easy, merry life” they led.⁵⁶ As the twentieth century dawned, dancing halls, cinemas, restaurants, skating-rinks, amusement parks and ice-cream parlors were regarded as “doubly dangerous” for inspiring girls to fund excursions in dishonest ways, as well as exposing them to “the risks of bad companionship.”⁵⁷ In the face of these perils many argued for the containment of prostitutes strictly to zones of vice; others for the confinement of women within “rational” places of amusement or, better still, within the home, safe from the dangers of bad company.

Maternal Culpability

Yet during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the home itself was increasingly perceived as a source of contamination. Juvenile delinquency was connected to the disintegration of the family economy in the wake of industrialization, and the rise of slum districts in rapidly expanding population centres; alongside these structural influences, however, delinquency was also ascribed to individual parental failings. As children’s upbringing was primarily regarded as a maternal responsibility, women were again singled out as the cause of female degradation.⁵⁸ Squalid domestic conditions were attributed to lazy housewifery rather than poverty; this was believed to drive children onto the streets, where girls were at risk of succumbing to immorality.⁵⁹ In Australia especially, the greater freedom colonial mothers purportedly allowed their daughters was blamed for the emergence of such disagreeable figures as “larrikin” girls.⁶⁰ Some criticisms heaped upon mothers are almost

comical, such as the declaration of one English social reformer that a large cause of juvenile crime was the failure of mothers to control their daughters' appetites for sweets, which led them to commit thefts or turn to immorality to obtain these luxuries.⁶¹ Even dangers that seemed to indicate clear culpability of male family members, such as incest, were laid at the door of maternal negligence.⁶² Although sometimes attributed to simple ignorance among working-class mothers, these failings called into question the characters of mothers themselves.

The proliferation of literature that represented the submerged classes as part of "a race apart" suggested that delinquent mothers would inevitably produce corrupted daughters. It was unsurprising the daughters of female criminals usually followed in their footsteps, prison reformer Mary Carpenter asserted, given that their mother's example meant they were "cut off from all Christian or civilizing influences, as if they had been born in a heathen country."⁶³ Slum journalism was dominated by images of girls daily neglected as their mothers solicited or engaged in drunken sprees.⁶⁴ The effect of exposure to such scenes was declared observable in the high numbers of daughters and sisters found following their female relatives into the sex trade.⁶⁵ Male criminality or alcoholism was considered less influential on their children's futures. Sanger's insistence that "a bad man may have virtuous children, a bad woman hardly ever" represented the generally-held view.⁶⁶

The logic of maternal culpability permeated not only environmental explanations of crime, but biological arguments of criminal inheritance. Just as the mother's example was held more pernicious than the father's influence, so nineteenth-century scientific inquirers found that signs of degeneration descended "more certainly" through women than men.⁶⁷ Hereditary explanations of crime became increasingly fashionable following the publication of Charles Darwin's work on evolution in 1859, enjoying their greatest popularity in Australia at the turn of the century.⁶⁸ It was in the 1870s, however, that two influential

American works focused international attention on females as the progenitors of criminal races. The first traced the genealogy of a New England woman the author labelled “Margaret, mother of criminals” to show she had produced hundreds of descendants who were paupers, prisoners, prostitutes or mentally impaired.⁶⁹ A more extensive study of this woman and her four sisters’ descendants, who were christened the Jukes, claimed that the family deteriorated further with each generation.⁷⁰ Lingering fears about the convict taint, as well as anxieties over immigration and the Indigenous population, meant Australian commentators were particularly perturbed by the popular belief that the children of degenerate women tended to be of a “weaker and worse type than the mother.”⁷¹

While hereditary discourse made women’s familial relationships a source of unintended danger, other narratives suggested they were sites of deliberate corruption by accusing women of profiting from the prostitution of their female relatives.⁷² Although fathers were occasionally mentioned playing the role of pimp, it was once more women who were most often implicated in such practices.⁷³ The discourse was at its height in the late nineteenth century, during which time a variety of female relatives starred in reformer literature as destroyers of female innocence. In the immensely successful 1883 pamphlet *Bitter Cry of Outcast London* a woman thus berates a rescue-worker for depriving her of the support her granddaughter’s prostitution provided.⁷⁴ Even in George Bernard Shaw’s 1894 socialist play *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, the central character is persuaded into prostitution by her sister, although Shaw sympathetically contextualized this within capitalism’s limitations of women’s financial options.⁷⁵

Whatever the context, the pervasive discourse of female relatives contributing to women’s downfall meant that women’s inter-familial relationships, like their friendships, were constructed as sites of danger. It also suggested that women’s “instinctive hostility” towards each other might even extend to their own daughters. Fictional accounts of female

descent into crime frequently linked women's facilitation of their daughters' destruction to an unexplained antipathy. Jane Cameron tells a prison matron that the mother who set her on the path to jail had hated her since birth.⁷⁶ Similarly, in the 1893 American novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Maggie's alcoholic mother abuses her from childhood and later turns her out onto the streets, although she is more loving towards Maggie's brother.⁷⁷ Absence of maternal feeling was considered typical of female offenders.⁷⁸ Lombroso suggested that the "lack of natural affection" observed among female members of criminal families was simply the most elementary example of the "barbarity" that characterized the primitive state of all women's relations to each other.⁷⁹

Lombroso's theory that the dynamics that operated between criminal women were simply the most graphic demonstrations of a more general animosity among the sex was reinforced in criminal discourse by the behavior of others who stood in a familial or pseudo-familial relationship to women. Historians have frequently noted that female reformers emphasized the benevolent maternal influence they were able to provide in their work as prison visitors, child rescuers and administrators of refuges and industrial schools.⁸⁰ However, another prevalent discourse declared that female rehabilitation was often prevented by women's hardness on their own sex, with James pronouncing that "woman alone...casts stones at her erring sister."⁸¹ Men, meanwhile, sometimes emerged in roles that underscored maternal treachery. In narratives appearing in the colonial press, male reformers motivated by the "stirrings of a father's heart" thus rescued girls driven from home by unfeeling mothers, or saved their female relatives from brothels in the face of opposition from women whose age placed them in a *faux*-maternal position.⁸²

The contest for female virtue likewise came down to a confrontation between an evil matriarch and protective patriarch in W. T. Stead's infamous "Maiden Tribute" exposé in 1885. The article contained the story of "Lily," a thirteen-year-old who the London journalist

arranged through a procuress to purchase from her mother for five pounds. Judith Walkowitz notes that in the reporting of the story, the actions of the coterie of evil women who facilitated the transaction stood in stark relief to descriptions of responses by the men in the piece. Lily's father was incensed to the point of violence by the discovery of his wife's behavior; meanwhile Stead ensured the girl's removal to a place of protection.⁸³ Figuring fathers, or alternative patriarchal characters such as brothers, husbands, or even the paternalistic State, as the rescuers of daughters lost to sin furthered the implication that willingness to injure others was a special feature of female relationships.

Criminal Exploitation

Female relationships were constructed as injurious not only in portrayals of the origins of women's criminal careers, but in discussion of the crimes they thereafter perpetrated. Just as the nineteenth century was marked by growing concerns about the exploitation of workers in the legitimate economy, so too was this mirrored by anxieties about exploitation in the criminal economy. The realm of prostitution, considered the staple occupation of criminal women, was one especially where various females were depicted facilitating the exploitation of fellow women. This is most evident in the offence that stimulated moral panics across several continents between the 1870s and the First World War: white slavery.

Social explorers estimated that the female practitioners of this "accursed trade," procuresses, were responsible for a quarter of all prostitutes brought into the profession.⁸⁴ While apprehensions about nefarious women ensnaring girls for the sex trade emerged from the early modern period as urbanisation produced concerns about the victimisation of girls within the anonymous city environment, it was not until the Victorian era that rising anxiety about prostitution transformed the problem into a worldwide *cause célèbre*.⁸⁵ Following Stead's 1885 "Maiden Tribute" exposé, conviction in the existence of procuresses thrived

even in Australia, despite the region's less industrialized and populated character.⁸⁶ Stories imitating international narratives were eagerly purveyed by the local press, although in a variation – also evident in New Zealand and the United States – procuresses were often portrayed providing victims for the “depraved lusts” of the despised local Chinese populace, rather than the aristocratic or Continental clientele of British discourse.⁸⁷

Procuresses were rendered all the more sinister by implications that they were motivated not just by greed (contemporaneously identified as a key vice of the era), but by malice. Writing in 1871 of the procuresses he alleged abounded in Cork, William Logan declared that such women felt “no remorse for the miseries they entail upon their innocent victims, but rather glory in their shame, and publicly boast of their triumphs.”⁸⁸ Elsewhere procuresses were depicted as witch-like figures, the facility with which they were able to decoy girls ascribed to their being “inhumanely cunning in their awful craft.”⁸⁹ At the same time they were being portrayed as unnaturally devilish, however, the success of the procuress was said to derive from the natural ability of all women for “ruse and deception.”⁹⁰ The superior proficiency of women in this regard was used to explain their preponderance over men in the business, with instances proffered of girls “too shy and coy” to be mastered by men, falling prey to the “wiles of an old she-devil.”⁹¹

The ploys procuresses were described using to ensnare women were usually based on their first befriending them, which conditions in the industrialized city were portrayed giving them unique opportunities to do. This duplicity became all the more poignant as the “pretended friendship” often occurred in times of distress: women out of work were approached with offers of employment and shelter; girls recently arrived in the city were assured they were being taken to a respectable abode by seemingly well-meaning strangers; lonely girls were invited by new friends to come home to meet their mother.⁹² In Brisbane, newly-arrived female immigrants were warned to steer clear of Stanley Street, a place

notorious for the number of “red blinds” in the windows, where women would purportedly “pitch a yarn” about having known a girl’s folks back home, subtly leading homesick girls to their doom.⁹³ Described “dazzling” girls with their “coquettish and seductive behaviour,” procuresses not only distracted from the problem of male seducers, but seemingly took on their role.⁹⁴ Like the male seducers of Victorian melodrama, when persuasion failed the procuress was believed to make recourse to more disreputable means, including force, fraud or intoxication.⁹⁵ By the early twentieth century, all three were being combined in stage and film narratives where the dastardly procuress engaged girls as domestics then prevailed upon them to share a drink with their new mistress, only to shatter the illusion of affectionate camaraderie by making them victims of violence and rape once overcome.⁹⁶

The apparent pervasiveness of the procuring system suggested that women willing to engage in the exploitation of other females were literally everywhere. Apart from the reputed legions of women who made procuring their full-time occupation, reformers accused women of setting up labor agencies, shops and laundries with a specific view to the lucrative sideline such businesses would afford them by bringing them into contact with girls they could direct towards brothels.⁹⁷ Brothel-keepers themselves were described acting the part of procuress, visiting hospitals to prey upon needy girls about to be discharged.⁹⁸ The effect of these tales was to convey the sense that as any woman might have evil designs on members of their own sex, all interactions with other women must be approached with caution.

Brothel-keepers, also portrayed as mainly women, were another figure whose demonization perpetuated the belief that relationships within the female criminal economy were characterized by abuse. Described as a “ferocious mercenary band, tyrannising over the unfortunate helots who form their stock-in-trade,” brothel-keepers were condemned for making fortunes off other women’s degradation.⁹⁹ As with procuresses, such profiteering was blamed on a rapaciousness perhaps connected to more general Victorian concerns about

growing materialism.¹⁰⁰ To achieve the means by which they “retired wealthy into private life,” these “avaricious duennas” were said to claim at least half of their workers’ earnings.¹⁰¹ Unprincipled women were also represented defrauding girls of their remuneration by furnishing them with showy garments “at the most exorbitant rate,” as well as charging them for board, medical expenses and the cost of “advertising.”¹⁰² The unforgiving picture that emerged of brothel-keepers in popular discourse helped justify making them the central focus of legislative action against prostitution in Australia from the 1890s.¹⁰³

The cruelty of brothel-keepers was rendered even more monstrous as, like procuresses, they were depicted having a facility for aping friendship. Adopting a jovial manner to calm the trepidations of girls upon arrival, mistresses who held out the “brightest prospects” were said afterwards to subject women to the most “brutal and disgraceful treatment.”¹⁰⁴ As Bronwyn Dalley observes of white slavery discourse in New Zealand, the portrayal of brothel-keepers and procuresses as older women meant the initial solicitude attributed to them invoked the figure not only of the false friend, but wicked stepmother.¹⁰⁵ According to most narratives, brothel-keepers decoyed girls with promises of the care and shelter they ought to have received at home, but provided it in exchange for the degradation of domesticity. They likewise stripped new girls of the “apparel...which parental care...had clothed them” to deck them out in fashions that became markers of their shame.¹⁰⁶ This inversion of legitimate maternity was given a literal interpretation in 1888 by Edward Dyson’s tale *Mr and Mrs Sin Fat*, the story of an Anglo-Australian woman who abandons her husband and child for a Chinese lover. She helps him secure victims for his Melbourne brothel, but kills both her lover and herself upon discovering that her grown-up daughter has thus been brought to the den.¹⁰⁷ The implication was that all girls were potential daughters, whose abuse by their metaphoric mothers demonstrated the perversity of the women involved.

Having secured a girl to the trade, the pretence brothel-keepers made of caring for them was supposedly maintained only in high-class brothels, where madams would “humour and coax and caress” their most popular courtesans “as pet animals are coaxed and humoured.”¹⁰⁸ Even here any semblances of affection were purportedly quickly abandoned once a girl ceased to earn, after which she would find herself “brutally turned out of doors, often with no better covering than an old petticoat.”¹⁰⁹ Most brothel-keepers were described showing no care for girls once entrapped, subjecting them to a regimen that involved “no rest...no turning down a job.”¹¹⁰ These “brutalised woman-farmers”, who would “drive into the streets with taunts and curses the diseased unfortunate”, were said to be perversely proud of their rise to a position above their doomed victims.¹¹¹ This self-importance encouraged them to treat those who worked for them with an icy reserve in order to preserve the “dignity of rank”, keeping “at arm’s length” women who, far from being regarded as daughters, were viewed simply “as slaves, or as beasts of burden.”¹¹²

The repeated characterization of girls who worked for brothel-keepers as “the most abject slaves” was used to emphasize what was perceived to be an inescapable relationship.¹¹³ Diabolical mistresses allegedly kept women confined to the brothel through both threats and violence.¹¹⁴ A common trope was that brothel-keepers prevented women leaving by depriving them of clothes and only allowing them out in borrowed garments that they would be accused of stealing if they tried to abscond.¹¹⁵ The debts incurred through excessive fees charged for clothing were said to keep women “virtual prisoners” of keepers.¹¹⁶ According to popular discourse, brothel inhabitants were moreover terrorized by madams about the fate that awaited them if they left, in which they would be shunned by respectable society and find themselves unable to work or return to the families they had shamed.¹¹⁷

However, although prostitutes were believed to detest brothel-keepers, perceiving them “as their very worst enemies,” they were also represented as complicit in other women’s exploitation, helping keep fellow workers captive by spying on them or assisting in decoying new women.¹¹⁸ Such actions were attributed not to coercion but malevolence. In James Greenwood’s 1869 text *The Seven Curses of London*, when a girl who has wisely negotiated to pay a brothel-keeper a flat fee is tricked into accepting a less equitable arrangement by trumped-up charges of theft, she is thus jeered at by the other girls, who are “glad to see her brought to their level.”¹¹⁹ It was pointed out that though brothel-keepers were “unfeeling and tyrannical” beings who wielded “the sceptre of their power without mercy and without justice,” they differed “little in their real character from the common prostitute” from whose ranks they had largely been drawn.¹²⁰

As the nineteenth century went on the trope of rapacious females growing rich off the distress of other women became associated not only with prostitution, but with other specifically female crimes, such as abortion, baby-farming and fortune-telling.¹²¹ Some writings even suggested that a willingness to economically victimize members of their own sex was not limited to women involved in illicit activity but was a trait among women generally. Several writers, including Sydney feminist Louisa Lawson, cited upper-class women’s exploitation of servants and seamstresses as another factor driving them to prostitution.¹²² In her examination of the plight of American female factory workers in 1900, reformer Helen Campbell likewise seemed to borrow directly from her previous rhetoric on brothel-keepers when she declared that women who rose to become supervisors were “not only as filled with greed and as tricky and uncertain in their methods as the worst class of male employers, but even more ingenious in specific modes of imposition.”¹²³ It was thus implied that most women – influenced in part by the era’s commercialism – would take advantage of opportunities to take advantage of other women.

Criminal Personalities

While criminal women were constructed as resembling other females in their treatment of their own sex, Victorians' scientific temperament meant they were also obsessed with delineating a distinctive pathology among female delinquents. The characteristics ascribed to criminal women suggested they were fundamentally incapable of friendship. Quick, child-like tempers were found to make outbursts of violence among them inevitable.¹²⁴ An innate disposition to lying reputedly led to "acts of dishonesty" among even "the most intimate friends and acquaintances."¹²⁵ Others argued that an inborn lack of mental development rendered them "incapable of altruism," and ready to sacrifice all other considerations "even to the prejudice of their relations and best friends" for their own pleasure and comfort.¹²⁶ Conflicts also allegedly resulted from a propensity to jealousy and distrust as – knowing "the deceitfulness of their own hearts" – criminal women believed others to be "equally corrupted in their affections."¹²⁷

Some argued though that such spitefulness was common to all women, with debased women simply lacking the necessary "firmness and power of mind" to conceal it.¹²⁸ Greenwood, while postulating that underclass women possessed an innate lack of altruism that made it impossible for them to sympathize with fellow unfortunates in distress, nevertheless concluded that the "sly triumph" of the "ascendant harlot" over her sisters in the gutter was in reality no different to similar feelings that prevailed among women in everyday society.¹²⁹ Within delineations of a supposedly criminal personality, intimations thus remained that enmity among criminal women was merely a reflection of the generality of female interpersonal relationships.

Yet, as Marilyn Wood Hill notes in her study of American prostitution, sitting uneasily beside depictions of the criminal woman's malevolence were instances of kindness

and companionability that gave rise to the “whore with heart of gold” stereotype.¹³⁰ While other writers did comment on the goodness criminal women occasionally showed, the inclusion of these commendations within texts where the preponderance of stories related to women dragging each other down meant the negative construction of female interpersonal relationships predominated. Examples of female camaraderie proffered by social investigators suggested that amity among them was largely confined to exceptional circumstances, solicitude being reserved for the pregnant, sick, and dying, or those in need of temporary shelter or support.¹³¹

Relegating instances of goodness to evidence of mental aberration, some speculated that women who suffered from criminal degeneracy evinced a “child’s generosity” that manifested in random acts of benevolence or by intense but temporary passions.¹³² With child-like intransigence prostitutes were portrayed lavishing all their attention upon one object, usually a worthless lover, or family member ignorant of their true circumstances.¹³³ Jane Addams contended that these attachments sprang not from motives of affection but the woman’s need to justify her illicit mode of life by convincing herself “the money she earns is needed for the support of someone dependent upon her.”¹³⁴ The willingness of prostitutes to contribute to comrades’ funeral expenses was similarly attributed not to innate goodness, but to fears about their spiritual welfare raised by the spectre of death.¹³⁵ Evidence of fellow feeling among disadvantaged women was further undermined by intimations that benevolence was driven by self-interest, such as madams keeping workers beholden to them by caring for them when ill.¹³⁶

Victorian commentators further denied that such instances demonstrated a true rapport among women by maintaining that kindnesses were poorly repaid by recipients. Parent-Duchâtelet pronounced that it was well-known that prostitutes would support their co-workers “even though they know that the women they are helping have let them down in the

past, and that they need expect no thanks for what they are doing now.”¹³⁷ Tate went further, alleging that a woman who had received support from one of her unfortunate companions would not only fail to evince gratitude, but would frequently “traduce and maltreat her benefactress.”¹³⁸ In one narrative, a girl was described reporting to the London Rescue Home “penniless and homeless, having just been robbed of half-a-crown by a girl to whom she had given a meal.”¹³⁹ In another, a young prostitute was said to have “tried in vain to find a true friend among the others,” only to be poorly recompensed for her efforts as one “had borrowed and not repaid,” while another had been friendly then cast her off.¹⁴⁰ Reciprocal friendship among female offenders was thus portrayed as unlikely, while the more affirmative aspects of their connections to each other were only grudgingly acknowledged, or instanced in such a way that their significance was disavowed.

Mutual Destruction

When confronted by scenes of sociability among criminal women, contemporaries denied these proceeded from true pleasure in each other’s company. Instead, the merry-making witnessed in brothels and on the streets was explained away as instances of forced gaiety that concealed inner-misery and loneliness.¹⁴¹ Alienists theorized that the “bright and buoyant humour” observed among many criminals was another symptom of child-like development.¹⁴² This simulation of conviviality nevertheless created unease, not only as a potential lure that might induce pleasure-bent girls to adopt a criminal career, but as a means by which women who had recently entered low life might be further corrupted.¹⁴³ Far from commending the “acts of kindness and charity” women occasionally performed for each other, it was feared that this “friendly intercourse” led to the communication of “bad habits and customs” among already debased women.¹⁴⁴

Friendships between women of the criminal classes, when they were allowed to exist, were characterized as just as dangerous as enmity. According to prison investigators, intense friendships often developed between two female inmates that were “very injurious,” although “the same power of affection, if rightly directed [towards a worthier object], might be the means of great good.”¹⁴⁵ Instead, prison friendships were described perverting more natural – and potentially reformative – relationships, such as that between mother and child, with some prisoners said to exhibit more concern for their “pals,” than their babies.¹⁴⁶ Whereas discord was perceived to be a natural state among criminal women, friendships between them were often portrayed as abnormal in aspect, occasioning mad or pathological behavior. The most written-about custom of female prisoners was their practice of falling into frenzies of shouting and self-harm if separated from their “pals” by placement in different dormitories.¹⁴⁷ In *Oliver Twist*, Bet, Nancy’s streetwalking companion, is similarly described being sent mad by her friend’s death, necessitating her institutionalization.¹⁴⁸

Strong attachments to other women could in themselves be regarded as evidence of mental aberration if they hinted at lesbianism, which various European and British theorists believed flourished in brothels and female prisons.¹⁴⁹ The literature suggested that malignancy still underlay these relationships, with brothel-keepers described compelling their workers to submit to “unnatural crimes” with them by threats, while in prison girls were said to be overpowered by lascivious older women.¹⁵⁰ An anecdote by John Freeman intended to show the perverse morality of Melbourne’s underclass suggests that in relationships between low women, abnormal affection was regarded as the flipside of hostility. In the tale, a male slum-dweller installs a second concubine in his house against the wishes of his wife, and comes home at the end of the first day to find his dinner uncooked as the women have spent the day “fighting and screaming like wild cats.” Having beat the women into submission, the man finds good humor restored by the liberal dispensation of liquor and a “triangular kissing-

match,” but abandons the experiment the next night when he comes home to find his dinner again uncooked because the women have spent the day in bed together.¹⁵¹ If disorderly women were not attacking each other, they were thus represented going to the other extreme by adopting what was viewed as an unnatural and equally damaging passion for one another.

In the discursive realm constructed by nineteenth and early-twentieth-century commentators, women of the submerged classes therefore lived lives where danger, exploitation and abuse characterized their treatment of each other.¹⁵² These experiences were capped off in many narratives by an early death, despite some reformers’ assertions that working-class women who used prostitution as a makeshift afterwards returned to their regular way of life.¹⁵³ In general the prevailing belief remained that female criminals would “terminate their days in the Infirmary – by suicide – or in some wretched cellar,” where their “dying agonies” would vie with the “oaths of their drunken companions.”¹⁵⁴ The loneliness of this ending reinforced their position as a *femme isolée*, unmourned by those whose companionship had contributed to their ultimate destruction.

Conclusion

The community embodied by women of the criminal classes in the popular imagination during the long nineteenth century was thus imagined not as a community at all, but as a group bent on each other’s destruction. Australia received this conception from overseas, particularly from the Anglo-American zeitgeist, and perpetuated it through colonial variations of narratives that sustained the assumptions that: the origins of women’s criminal careers was frequently due to other women’s malevolent aegis; the female criminal economy was founded upon the exploitation of women by other women; and the female criminal personality was incapable of meaningful relationships, apart from those that would lead to further degradation and misery. These discourses not only communicated an overwhelmingly

negative image of relationships between female offenders, but were periodically linked to a malicious state of relations among women generally. Such representations only receded during the interwar period with the decline of the social explorer genre and the shift of concerns to organized crime, immigration and the war's legacy of male violence.

However, the overarching narrative that women are each other's worst enemies has never entirely disappeared from the western cultural landscape, continuing to influence popular culture and media headlines even today.¹⁵⁵ There may also be continuing connections to criminal discourse. Contemporary criminologists Medea Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin suggest that since the emergence in the 1970s of renewed interest in female criminality, the problem of "mean girls" and relational aggression among women has received disproportionate attention in sociological literature.¹⁵⁶ Other criminologists have also raised concerns that there seems to be little interest in the beneficial aspects of female friendship.¹⁵⁷ Some texts suggesting gang culture encourages high levels of "girl-on-girl abuse" eerily echo nineteenth-century discourse.¹⁵⁸ The assumption of female enmity within criminal discourse is thus a stereotype that needs to be recognized not only by historians, but practitioners of other disciplines. Furthermore, the enduring nature of this construction highlights the continuing importance of the study of the history of female friendship, and particularly I would argue, of support networks among female criminals.

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