‘Angels of Arsenic’ and Ligatures: Analyzing Press Discourse and Expert Opinion on French Murderesses of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore perceptions about aberrant women in France between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by analyzing two case studies: the murder trials of Marie Lafarge (1840) and Marguerite Steinheil (1909). This thesis argues that across this span of time, French society, culture, and politics underwent dramatic transformations, and one of the realms where we may view this changing landscape was in specializations like psychiatry, which came into their own and were able to present an authoritative interpretation on women's behavior 'abnormalities'. By tracing what it meant to be 'abnormal', 'normal', 'threatening', or 'pathological,' in both public and expert accounts, we can trace social anxieties in response to these two infamous crimes. By engaging in this diachronic analysis, we are better able to understand the way that 'deviant' women were used as discursive subjects that reflected broader social concerns and echoed evolving discourses on social ills.

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Introduction

In 1840, Marie Lafarge, the so-called 'Angel of Arsenic' was tried for murdering her husband via poisoning by arsenic—the nineteenth century's "king of poisons."[1] Her case was deeply resonant with the French public—a fact that becomes evident when studying the newspapers of the time. Indeed, one would have a difficult time finding a paper that did not mention Lafarge's crime. In the coverage of the trial, much was made of Lafarge's strangeness and potential for wickedness, yet she was not diagnosed hysterical despite the fact that she fit the criteria. Her case seemed able to bring together several cogent elements of French society and culture of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly around worries about aberrant women. Seventy years later, another woman, Marguerite Steinheil, France's 'Red Widow' was tried for the strangulation deaths of her husband and mother. Much like Lafarge's, this case made headlines and was broadly covered by French press. And just like Lafarge's earlier case, Steinheil's perhaps resonated with the French people for its ability to provide a discursive space in which the public could exorcize its worries about deviance in women and, as we shall see, experts could offer interpretations and develop theories.

For their significance in French history, these cases raise a number of questions: how were these women's respective crimes discursively appropriated by experts and media? How does public and expert opinion reflect 'common knowledge' about women's nature and deviance? In what ways were the borders between expert opinion and media commentary blurred? Why were popular sources and experts alike fascinated with these cases and what does this fascination tell us about anxieties around gendered pathology? How did public attitudes and

[1] José Ramón Bertomeu-Sánchez, "Arsenic in France: The Cultures of Poison During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Compound Histories: Materials, Governance and Production, 1760-1840*, ed. Lissa L. Roberts and Simon Werrett. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 131-157, 131.

expert theories toward female deviance change between Lafarge's and Steinheil's trials, and what do these shifts reveal to us about the changing landscapes of criminology, psychiatry, gender, and media? It will be the purpose of this thesis to answer these questions.

In this thesis I will aim to explore diachronic understandings of aberrant women in France, with a special focus on hysteria and degeneracy. I will use Lafarge's 1840 trial and Steinheil's 1909 trial as temporal book ends, as I would argue that across this span of time, French society, culture, and politics underwent dramatic transformations. Specifically, during this period theories on pathology developed rapidly, and specializations like psychiatry came into its own and was able to present an authoritative interpretation on women's behavior. Thus, this time period and these cases have much to tell us about shifting social anxieties about women and serve to illuminate the way that fears of women's nature interacted with public and expert discourses during a period of social and political unease. As such, this thesis will contend with a multiplicity of intersecting themes like, psychopathology, mass media, social and political instability, criminality, deviance, degeneration, hysteria, romantic literature, contagion, and illegibility.

As such, I have relied on much primary and secondary literature. My primary source base is largely taken from the Bibliothèque nationale de France and consists of French press accounts of the trials, psychiatric and criminological treatises, and memoirs written by Lafarge and Steinheil. I use newspapers to reconstruct the public discourses and responses to the cases and to uncover evidence of social anxieties about aberrant women as presented in press coverage. Psychiatric and criminological texts are useful because they provide a glimpse of an evolving landscape of expert theories on female criminality and psychopathology—two subjects which, as we shall see, are ultimately inextricably bound. Lastly, I rely on memoirs by Lafarge and

Steinheil to provide not only their valuable perspectives on their own cases, but these documents also allow us to view the ways that these women hoped to be perceived by the public—both supporters and opponents.

This piece draws on microhistorical approaches in two ways: first, it argues that ideas move through different spheres in compelling ways; second, it makes the claim that criminal cases and trials can be used as a tool to decipher broader sociocultural trends, attitudes, and ideas. The secondary scholarship upon which this thesis rests is either representative of this approach or it provides a fruitful group of scholars on top of which my thinking has grown through the course of this project. In *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations*, Mark S. Micale asserted that scholarship on hysteria written during the 1980s and 90s can be thought of as the "new hysteria studies" (or as he was tempted to call it, the "New Hystericism") for the sheer amount of rich work written on the subject. In his introduction, he claimed that since the 1970s, interpretations of nineteenth-century hysteria have been analyzed through a feminist lens, and have asserted that hysteria can either be viewed as a metaphor "both for women's position in past patriarchal societies and for the image of the feminine in the history of scientific discourses."[2] Further, hysteria has been used, Micale wrote, as a tool with which to appraise past psychiatric theories. His study fits this new paradigm in scholarship because as he stated, his piece brings together "in one place ideas, sources, methodologies, and interpretations that have previously remained separate." In other words, one can think of his work as encapsulating the aims and approaches of 'new hysteria studies.'

For our purposes, the chapter "Cultures of Hysteria: Future Orientations" deserves specific mention here for its ability to link the medical with the cultural. Micale argues that the

[2] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 8.

process of conceptualizing hysteria as it existed in the nineteenth century should not be understood merely as a top-down project by which the medical sphere disseminated their theories of psychopathology into the culture, in a kind of trickle-down movement. Rather, we should understand that the developmental path that nineteenth-century hysteria took was an idea-sharing dynamic, wherein ideas about women's mental maladies developed both in medicine and other cultural spaces, especially literature. There existed then, a strong relationship between medicine and literature which made it so that novels influenced the creation of nineteenth-century hysteria and fears about the pathology as much as did alienists.[3] Much like Micale's thinking on literature and hysteria, I contend that hysteria was present in the culture far before it became medicalized as a psychiatric category. The process of creating a nosological category during the nineteenth century can be understood as a broader cultural project. To Micale's framing, I would simply emphasize the fact that press accounts were useful to this end as well. While studying the accounts of both trials, I found that there was a significant amount of blurring between media and psychiatry, and in the case of Lafarge, newspapers seemed to anticipate her retrospective diagnosis.

In another monograph which I believe emblematizes the 'new hysteria studies,' *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France*[4], Jann Matlock argues that both prostitutes and hysterics should be 'read' in the context of nineteenth-century novels. Such novels were, she claims in her chapter on Marie Lafarge, dangerous to the delicate nervous systems of a newly created, female reading public. Certain novels, especially romantic ones, had the power to 'infect' or trigger woman readers with hysteria—a pathology to

[3] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 237.
[4] Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

which women remained particularly susceptible. Matlock points out that these theories gave rise to an understanding of hysteria that was bound to romantic novels. Further, just as women read these sordid books, social commentators and alienists were attempting to 'read' women for any sign of nervousness or threat. Ultimately, Matlock's work ably illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of this new paradigm in hysteria studies by linking romantic novels, social anxieties, and process of medicalization in nineteenth-century France.

Jan Goldstein's *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*[5] traces the professionalization and specialization of French psychiatry during the nineteenth century.[6] Her piece intervenes in the field by providing an historical interpretation of psychiatry's development by exploring the way that psychiatrists cultivated authority in and outside of the asylum through establishing, promoting, and expanding specialized categories, and by creating a therapeutic program of 'consolation'—a secular alternative to religious remedies. In the chapter, "Hysteria, Anticlerical Politics, and the View Beyond the Asylum," Goldstein discusses the role that hysteria played in formulating a specialized psychiatric profession, through political upheavals that in turn valued psychiatry and did not. In short, hysteria provided a useful category upon which psychiatrists could emphasize their anticlerical and political leanings. Goldstein's monograph demonstrates the growth of a field historicized against political and social context—an approach which fits the 'new hysteria studies' methodology by putting forward new understandings of historical developments.

[5] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[6] See also Emese Lafferton, "The Hygiene of Everday Life and the Politics of Turn-of-the-Century Psychiatric Expertise in Hungary" which reconstructs the development of Hungarian psychiatry and analyzes psychiatrists' contributions as the purveyors of 'the hygiene of everyday life.'

My work in this thesis takes much insight from the 'new hysteria studies' paradigm of the 80s and 90s combined with a microhistorical approach. Throughout this piece, I am interested in exploring the ways that psychopathology in women interacted with its milieu. Edward Berenson's approach in *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* is quite similar to my own,[7] as he too aims to use a trial as a case study that can be applied to the goal of understanding French culture and society more broadly. This microhistorical approach to criminal trials can be summed up as follows:

> By reading out from one discrete, but in its own way momentous, event onto a wider field of politics and culture surrounding and encompassing it, I assess the ways in which French men and women perceived some of the most fundamental aspects of their culture: the meaning of crime and criminality; the legitimacy of political leadership; the changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity; the relations between family and nation, fathers and rulers; the differences between moral and immoral, just and unjust, honorable and dishonorable acts.[8]

I believe that nineteenth-century criminal trials as they interacted with notions of psychopathology have much to tell us about perceptions on normativity, abnormality, attitudes toward women and criminality, as well as shed some light on the changing nature of social anxieties, politics and culture. I found that by applying this methodology, one can trace the ways that ideas move.

To the existing literature, my piece seeks to make a few humble interventions. First, one should be attendant to the broader context which housed these cases. Marie Lafarge was not considered hysterical until long after her trial had ended, and her death had occurred. Newspapers certainly remarked on her oddness in a way that would be consistent with notions of hysteria in 1840, but yet, she was not formally diagnosed. I argue that significant historical developments are missed by remaining detached from this important context. Between 1840 and

[7] Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
[8] Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux,* 7.

1880, hysteria became a more prominent concept, and gained in popularity alongside an increasingly empowered psychiatric specialization. Thus, her retrospective diagnosis makes sense if one considers the historical context of the in-between. Likewise, Marguerite Steinheil's trial should be considered in its proper historical moment. Steinheil was also considered hysterical by some sources, yet her 'type' of hysteria should be understood as part of a national discourse on degeneration. To ignore the fears raised by the so-called 'woman question', the decline of birth rates, and perceived rise of crime is to misunderstand the stakes of her trial, and the interpretation of her actions. Finally, and ultimately, I believe that these cases are well-situated to tell us about social anxieties regarding women, how these fears changed over time, and to clarify the discourses that aimed to understand and appropriate women's behavior.

The layout and aims of each chapter are as follows: the first chapter discussed the fact that while Lafarge was perceived to be imaginative, strange, and eccentric—the very traits that could have warranted a hysteria diagnosis in 1840—she was not formally diagnosed as such at the time of her trial. Rather than judging her in the language of psychiatry then, experts and press directed attention toward her imagination, and argued that when stimulated by triggers such as romantic literature, psychological pathology could result. In chapter two, I will make the argument that while it is the case that Lafarge was not considered hysterical at the time of her trial, decades later, her case was appropriated and Lafarge was retrospectively diagnosed; we should understand this appropriation as the result of psychiatry's increasing power in French society, and the usefulness of the category within the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the last chapter, I argue that like Lafarge's, interpretations of Steinheil's case should be understood in relation to gendered social anxieties, and expert language gave the necessary terminology—primarily that of degeneration—to make more comprehensible fears represented

in this case. Ultimately, I aim to use these three points of reference[9] and two case studies to demonstrate how expert and public discourse around female deviance interact and change in response to shifting social anxieties. I argue that in the time between Lafarge's and Steinheil's cases, understandings of women's pathology, and in particular, theories about hysteria changed from a fixation on the negative impact of culture on women's imaginations in relation to romantic literature to a degenerative theory that posited the hereditary and biological nature of pathology in women.

[9] The three points of reference follow relevant developments in the narrative presented by this thesis. The first was the Lafarge trial in 1840 (chapter one); the second takes place roughly between 1860-1890 (chapter two); and the third is 1908-1909 when the Steinheil crime and trial occur (chapter three).

Chapter One: The Pathology of Marie Lafarge?: Social Anxieties about Romantic Literature, Hysteria, and Women's Illegibility

Fig. 1. "Marie Lafarge c. 1850," JStor Daily https://daily.jstor.org/the-arsenic-cake-of-madame-lafarge/

1.1 A Case of Poisoning

There were immediate signs of trouble between Marie and Charles Lafarge.[10] On their honeymoon in 1839, Marie "'repelled all of Lafarge's advances…hysterically believing that to preserve her virginity intact was essential to her survival as [romantic] heroine'…"[11] A matter of months later, despite the rocky start, things seemed to be improving between the couple, because in January of 1840 while on a trip to Paris, Charles Lafarge, bit into a cake that his family had sent him. At the very same time he ate the sweet gift, his family who he had left back at his ancestral home at le Glandier also had just finished eating their cakes. The simultaneous eating of this treat had been organized by Marie as part of a romantic surprise.[12] By 3 January, Lafarge had returned home to le Glandier, complaining of intense stomach pains. He would be bedridden as a result of this illness which caused him agonizing pain and sickness. Within a matter of days, Lafarge would be dead, and his new wife, Marie would be implicated in his murder. Paris was captivated. This was the story of the day, and Parisians could not get enough of news about the young woman and her doomed husband.[13]

The lively public response to this case invites many questions: what were the narratives around the crime? How can we conceptualize this crime, particularly in relation to attitudes about gender and theories about psychopathology? In other words, how did the Lafarge case

[10] I will refer to Marie as Lafarge unless I am referring to both Charles and Marie within the same section often enough so as to be confusing. In which case, I will refer to them by their surnames.
[11] Cited in: Lisa, Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 20130, 58.
[12] "Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement," *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*, September 12, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[13] Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 55.

echo nineteenth-century anxieties about pathology, women, and crime? How was Marie Lafarge used as a discursive object to put forward theories about women's nature? This chapter will aim to answer these questions and to use the Lafarge trial as a case study to discuss the space that pathological, criminal women occupied in the French culture, as well as to uncover narratives about women's minds and their capacity for violence. The goal will be to delve into gendered anxieties about women criminals as they were beginning to coalesce around the theories on pathology, women's imaginations, and romantic literature.

I would argue that fantasy is one of the themes present in the Lafarge trial. Certainly, as pointed to in the opening comments of this chapter, Marie's notion that it was necessary to remain virginal to keep intact the potential for romantic heroism points to the health of her inner fantasy life. Likewise, Charles Lafarge eating his poisoned cake at the same time as his wife and family despite the fact that they were in different spaces smacks of Marie's fantastical imagination. These and myriad other similar and seemingly personal details were reported on by a voracious press for a fascinated general audience. To the general public, Marie Lafarge was a fantastical figure. Both heroine and villain, depending on who was asked: her crime was devoured by a spellbound public, who wanted to know all the details of her sordid—albeit admittedly short-lived—life with her husband. The case had reached such mythical levels that the Goncourt brothers once commented that, "a government could keep its population distracted from unrest if only it could provide 'two things: a firework display every evening for the masses and a Lafarge trial every morning for the educated classes'."[14] Such was the investment in the trial's proceedings and outcome—a case that was thoroughly infused with fantasy.

[14] Cited in: Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 55.

It is necessary to define what I mean by fantasy. To my thinking, the role of the fantasy plays out in this context in two ways: first, during the first half of the nineteenth century, French alienists were offering as yet uncrystallized theories on female pathology; many of these theories included the idea that women were made sick by their powerful imaginations. In other words, in the mid-nineteenth-century, psychiatrists offered the opinion that at the root of women's pathology often lie a potent imagination, or fantasy life. To be sure, they named other factors as well, but I have found the imagination tends to be one of the most prevalent. Later in the nineteenth century, these 'abnormalities' in women's psyches would crystallize around a hysteria diagnosis, but this nosological category had not yet been formally defined by the neurologist, Charcot.[15] As of the 1840s however, theories on women's pathology had not yet solidified around the hysteria diagnosis, so what we are left with is a number of vague theories and clusters of symptoms mentioned in psychiatric texts, literature, and press, among which we may count a boundless imagination as one of the most prevalent offerings to explain female psychopathology.

Second, fantasizing is also visible in press coverage of the trial.[16] There seems to be much speculation in newspapers around Lafarge's state of mind during the trial. Journalists attempted to ascertain Lafarge's feelings by closely observing her behavior and affect, and recording Lafarge's idiosyncrasies alongside reporting of the trial. What is particularly odd, at least to my reading, is that at the same time testimonies present claims about Lafarge's active, inner fantasy life, the press seems to be engaging in a fantasy about Lafarge, her motives, and psyche.[17] Thus, fantasy in this case existed in a twofold manner: it was theorized that Lafarge

[15] Charcot classifies hysteria during his years while working in Salpêtrière, beginning in 1862.
[16] I am not suggesting that these two kinds of fantasy are connected, rather, I argue that fantasy in this case merely works on two distinct levels.
[17] Ruth Harris discusses the French press's attraction to cases like Lafarge's, and that their sensationalist and speculative readings were meant to provoke public reaction, however they also attracted the attention of experts. Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford:

suffered from an overactive imagination and was treated as the subject of anxious imaginings. Lafarge becomes then, an object of fascination as well as one who ostensibly suffers from the effects of an overactive imagination. This chapter will attempt to make the point that the ubiquity of imagination belongs to its historical context in that it points to the fact that there was much uncertainty about women's inner worlds and ultimately their dualistic capacity to at once perform the very picture of domestic purity while at the same time plotting and committing violence.

To trace these themes, it will be vital to begin by looking at the cultural context that created a sense of anxiety around female pathology and imagination—one that was born as a result of long-existing theories which claimed that women were biologically susceptible to pathology due to their reproductive capacity. To this end, the first part of this chapter will provide context necessary to meaningfully historicize Lafarge and her trial. It is my aim in this section to demonstrate the idea that early- to mid-nineteenth-century France was a society in transition, marked by social anxieties, from the political to the psychiatric spheres.

In the second part, I will delve into Marie Lafarge's personal history, up to and including the Lafarge trial and case. First, I will highlight the ways that Lafarge attempted to establish herself as a romantic heroine and will pay some attention to the fact that no small amount of young, middle-class women seemed to interpret Lafarge similarly. Second, I will make the argument that strangely, she was not diagnosed with hysteria by any professionals nor lay people until decades after her case.

In the final part of this chapter, I will focus the discussion on the role of women's imaginations in conversation with romanticism, crime, and pathology. My aim is to make the

Oxford University Press, 1991), 156-158.

intervention that when we discuss nineteenth-century gendered pathologies, we must center women's imaginations in the conversation. I argue that this is important because it is the illegibility of women's minds that causes anxieties about what women are capable of. Perhaps, to this logic, all women secretly have the capacity to poison their husbands, but one would not have access to this knowledge until it was too late. Thus, I would argue that to some extent, fascination about the female criminal is implied in such reports, and are visible, particularly in comments about Lafarge's behavior during the trial.

Ultimately, I would argue that due to the perceptible instability of nineteenth-century French society, ideas about women's minds came to the fore as a response to romanticism, increasingly sophisticated theories on women's pathologies, and salacious crimes committed by women, which were talked about endlessly in the increasingly powerful press. I make the claim that we are able to glean these anxious narratives from coverage on the Lafarge trial, which presents us with fertile ground to understand the fears about women who were immersed in romantic culture. While advancing theories in psychiatry about women's minds certainly seem to point to Lafarge's pathology, she was not 'diagnosed' hysteric until decades later. Thus, while we cannot speak of a clear hysteria diagnosis, fears about the dangers of women's robust imaginations and essentially nervous constitutions demonstrate the fact that while hysteria was not yet a broadly, culturally used diagnosis, its precursors are observable in news coverage of the Lafarge trial.

1.2 The State of Affairs before L'Affaire Lafarge

Early nineteenth-century French society felt frenetic. Between the beginning of the century and mid-century, the political landscape had oscillated wildly between a Bonapartist

dictatorship, a restored monarchy, and a republic. As historian of France Roger Price has argued, "the political history of nineteenth-century France can… be seen as a continuous search for stability."[18] In the years preceding the murder of Charles Lafarge, Parisians had seen increasingly repressive actions taken by the newly instated government of the July Monarchy, Louis-Philippe. While the electorate had been expanded by this time, the lower middle-class, peasants, and workers remained excluded. Such concerns led to a marriage of convenience between lower middle-class republicans and the working class—a union which led to mass protests and threat of upheaval. In November 1831, the city of Lyon was briefly taken by workers, leading journalist Saint-Marc Girardin to comment that, "this insurrection had 'revealed a great secret', which was that 'the Barbarians who threaten society are not…on the steppes of Tartary…they are in the suburbs of our manufacturing cities'."[19] Thus there was the sense, in the years leading up to the Lafarge trial that France generally, and the cities in particular were sources of instability to society, and the persistent threat of continued violence was reflected in media.

For our purposes, it is important to mention here as well that there was a very real and specific preoccupation with gendered instability. For young middle-class women, there existed the perception that their society was 'contradictory' with regards to women's rights and reality.[20] Marriageable women were surrounded by notions of women's rights, yet they were "obliged to wear the price tags of their dowries."[21] While the marriage market was expanding, most

[18] Roger Price, *A Concise History of France*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 181.
[19] Price, *A Concise History of France,* 194.
[20] Mary S Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (New York: Dover, 1977), 17.
[21] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 17.

bourgeois marriages were still arranged; daily life too was more restricted for young, Parisian women for example, than in England.[22]

As a result, and as James Mcmillan discusses in *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics*, the period between the revolution and the Second Republic saw the emergence of a kind of 'feminist' wave, wherein women sought to include their interests in existing reform agendas: "as one *femme nouvelle* put it: 'Only by emancipating woman will we emancipate the worker'."[23] Under the July Monarchy, women began submitting petitions to demand access to divorce, and protesting the gendered inequalities codified in the Civil Code.[24] Some women, as McMillan points out, made an ostensibly more radical set of demands and "made the case for the extension to women of the political rights conferred on men by the Charter of 1830."[25]

And at the center of this movement was the press. From the time of the French Revolution, there existed an optimism around the dream of a literate citizenry. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this hope became reality. By the end of the century, 95% of men and women were at least somewhat literate.[26] An increasingly literate public accompanied the rise of the mass press. One could make the claim that the nineteenth century was the age of the press: as Eugène Van Bemmel, chair of French literature at the University of Brussels claimed, "'Is it not in journalism that the principle characteristics of nineteenth-century society meet'?"[27] Van Bemmel's claim certainly encompasses changes in gender attitudes, as well as reactions to those

[22]Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 18.
[23] James McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000), 79.
[24] McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914*, 80.
[25] McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914*, 80.
[26] Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 204.
[27] Edmund Birch, *Fictions of the Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2018), 32.

changes. For one, the bourgeois, women's newspaper, *La Gazette des Femmes* organized petitions to fight for the abolition of Article 213 of the Civil Code—a provision that stated that women should obey their husbands.[28] *La Gazette* also fought for the decriminalization of adultery, women's suffrage, and sexual freedoms—a set of demands that succeeded in getting the newspaper censored, and editors jailed.[29]

Despite the July Monarchy's conservatism and censorship of the press, romantic literature experienced a boom during the nineteenth century in France. It has been difficult to define romanticism.[30] What was clear to contemporaries was that "a monumental upheaval in the cultural world was underway."[31] In her monograph, Mary S. Hartman has documented the link between Marie Lafarge and the proliferation of romantic literature in mid-nineteenth-century French culture. As Hartman elegantly points out, French romantic novels had not been 'sanitized' like they were in England. The former retained its original vituperative attitude toward bourgeois marriage and "glorified love-matches which overcame social barriers, and featured active roles for female heroines."[32] At the same time, in regards to self-determination in courtship, France was well behind her English counterpart.[33] While young women of France were marinated in a romantic culture that promoted 'sentiment,' what women's families expected of a match was strategic 'interest.'[34] Marriages must be in the interest of both families, and of course, sealed with an appropriately-sized dowry. What we see then is a sort of twofold

[28] McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914,* 80.
[29] McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914,* 80.
[30] Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History*, (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 5.
[31] Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution*, 1.
[32] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 18.
[33] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 18.
[34] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 18.

gap between expectations and reality, and between French women's experiences and those of English women, and romantic literature filled the cultural ether between these asymmetries.

There was also a 'darker' side to romantic literature which posed a threat to the conservative-minded's notion of stable society and gender relations. While the July Monarchy may have made the argument that censorship was mainly due to political concerns, there was an increasing focus on morality that concerned the regime. The Romantic Movement had brought back the appeal of stories about insanity and excessive emotion. Romanticism had "renewed interest in the mad genius that had been cultivated by Renaissance Platonism but dampened by the age of reason."[35] Novels that attracted women's attention were populated with heroines whose madness was apparently part and parcel of their appeal. It was feared that these novels put ideas into the minds of susceptible women. Novels like *Les Memoirs du Diable, Lélia, and Paul et Virginie* certainly come to mind. In these novels, even if the argument being made by the plot is one of morality and virtue, vice takes center stage.[36] Compromised women, or women with 'loose' morals, or hysterical women play a central role in such novels.

Aside from concerns regarding romanticism, there existed anxiety around the relationship between literate women and the potential pathologizing effects of education. Overly educated women ran the risk of inflaming their delicate nervous systems and devolving into a neurasthenic condition. Regardless of one's education level or class, women were understood to be particularly susceptible to the possibility of nervous reactions to romantic literature.[37] The notion that reading generally and certainly specific types of material could make women ill was one of the "fundamental tenet[s] of nineteenth-century *aliénisme*."[38] The *Dictionnaire des sciences*

[35] Cited in Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution*, 91
[36] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 184.
[37] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 213.
[38] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 218.

médicales went so far as to advise "forbidding hysterical girls 'erotic readings and the sight of everything that exalts the senses and the imagination'."[39] Another worry was that women would be overly invested in trial literature represented in newspapers like *La Gazette des Tribunaux*.[40] This is particularly relevant for our purposes as this outlet did cover Lafarge's case in *roman-feuilleton* format.[41] Such was the extent of the concern presented by mass literacy and the romantic movement on whole groups of people[42] that it ballooned into a national conversation spurred on by moral panic.

Trying to combat these social ills was French psychiatry. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Jan Goldstein illustrates in the first chapter of *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*, French psychiatry professionalized into a specialized discipline that existed apart from medicine.[43] As of the late eighteenth century, or the time of Foucault's "Great Confinement", caring for the mad had become the purview of the state, thus by the turn of the century, a cure for madness was a priority of medicine in order to relieve the burden on state institutions.[44] The Law of 1838 represented a seismic step toward psychiatry's ascension as it necessitated the creation of a psychiatric institutional apparatus where full-time doctors could care for the ill.[45] Yet, at the same time, psychiatry had a long way to go to be considered a specialization that should be responsible for the nation's pathological.

This is important historical context as it points to the fact that when Lafarge was tried for murder, the psychiatric profession was on the rise in terms of influence but was not yet in a

[39] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 218.
[40] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 215.
[41] The 'talk of the town' section of a newspaper usually written in a serial and novelistic manner.
[42] Workers too were thought to be susceptible to inflammatory ideas presented in books.
[43] Jan Goldstein, Console and Classify: *The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10
[44] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 42.
[45] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 276.

position to engage completely with the juridical sphere. Such details help us to understand why Lafarge was not put under the purview of psychiatry, even as much secondary scholarship on Lafarge associates her crimes with hysteria. In fact, it was not until decades later that Lafarge became a useful representation of the hysteric, born, female criminal.

At the time of her trial, hysteria was not even well codified or understood within the psychiatric profession. During the first half of the century, according to the psychiatric profession, hysteria was still an ill-defined, cluster of vague symptoms and theories. It was considered by some to be "'the wastepaper basket of medicine where one throws otherwise unemployed symptoms'."[46] This does not mean that hysteria did not exist, only that it was not yet the dominant diagnosis by a fully, socially-engaged psychiatric profession. As Mark S. Micale has demonstrated in his chapter, "Cultures of Hysteria: Future Orientations", the idea of hysteria was present in literature far before it was professionally and formally codified by Charcot.[47] While Micale's piece tends to focus on hysteria's representation in novels, and the way that literature influenced medicine, I have chosen to study the way that hysteria—in all but name—is clearly present in newspaper articles about Lafarge well before she was ever formally, if retroactively, diagnosed, because I believe that social concern over Lafarge was psychological even before the public had access to the clinical language associated with hysteria.

The reason why this context matters and why I have chosen to include it here is that it provides a necessary background to the Lafarge case. When taken together, these narratives provide a snapshot of the historical context for the Lafarge trial. It is vital to discuss all of these elements because in one way or another, all of these perspectives can be glimpsed in

[46] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 324.

[47] Mark S Micale, "Cultures of Hysteria: Future Orientations", in *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 225.

interpretations of Lafarge and her crimes. It is also crucial to understand that the nineteenth century in France was a time seemingly in flux or transition. The feelings of anxiety generated by perceptible changes in society and culture help to explain the reasons why the Lafarge trial resonated so forcefully, just as the Lafarge trial can be used as a case study that represents some of these changes.

1.3 L'Affaire Lafarge: "'Les sociétés ont les criminels qu'elles méritent.'"[48]

Echoing Lacassagne's famous sobriquet, Marie Lafarge was the criminal that mid-nineteenth-century France deserved because she emblematized the intersection of cultural themes discussed in the above section. As we shall demonstrate, on one hand, she was an object of fascination for middle-class women, for whom she seemed to serve as the embodiment of a romantic heroine. On the other, she was also of interest to criminologists like Cesare Lombroso who later in the century used her as a reference point for his explication of the criminal woman typology. She was simultaneously understood to be refined and dangerous. More broadly, Lafarge can also serve as the perfect example of social ambiguities that existed in mid-nineteenth-century France. She was at once an orphan, who had been adopted by a powerful aunt and uncle; she had aristocratic connections on her mother's side but would marry a bourgeois man with many debts and little social presence; she had access to privileged circles in Paris but could never marry into them because she lacked the money for a decent dowry, therefore she ended up at her husband's rundown estate outside of the city. Lafarge is an ideal figure for this

[48] Quoted in: Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 104.
Translation: "Society has the criminals it deserves."
Note: all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

study, as I would argue that her conflictual identities resonated with the Parisian public, as evidenced by their rapt attention to her case. By examining press from the Lafarge trial, as well as Lombroso's entries, this section will delve into these tensions and aim to analyze Marie Lafarge as a woman into whom Parisian society could pour their adoration, anxiety, and fantasy.

Long before she swept into the Parisian consciousness[49], Marie Lafarge was Marie Fortunée Cappelle. Born in 1816 to an army officer father and his wife, she was orphaned by the age of twelve, and by eighteen, was sent to live with her aunt, the wife of the secretary-general of the Bank of France. Lafarge's late teenage years were spent in close proximity to privilege, and as such, she was able to reap the benefits of an elite education and to gain entrée, at least to some extent, to social circles that would have been otherwise closed to her. By the time that Marie was in her early twenties, the issue of marriage had been broached within the family. What to do with a girl who had social standing, yet could boast only a small dowry? The answer came in the guise of a marriage agency, contacted by one of her uncles after no suitable suitors had manifested. The name Charles Lafarge was put forward as a potential match. He was a twenty-eight-year-old son of a justice of the peace from Limousin, a region in south-central France, and the owner of a successful iron forge. In order to hide the fact that Lafarge had been proposed by a marriage agency, the uncle "arranged a 'chance' meeting with his 'friend' at the opera. Marie found [Lafarge] both boorish and ugly"[50], but Marie's preferences did not seem to matter much, as within a few weeks after this first meeting, Marie and Charles were married. Within six months, Charles died from arsenic poisoning, and as a result of an investigation launched by the Lafarge family, Marie was indicted for his murder. [51]

[49] This is merely a term. I am not suggesting that there was only one Parisian conscious mind, like a hive.
[50] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 11.
[51] I referenced Downing's and Hartman's works on Marie Lafarge to reconstruct her biography.

The murder trial began shortly thereafter and spawned no small amount of speculation and fascination among Parisian people. The trial was, according to *Madame Bovary* author, Flaubert, "'the obsession of the day" that "never failed to provoke a spirited discussion'."[52] Indeed, Parisian society was quite neatly split into the so-called *Lafargistes* and *Anti-Lafargistes*.[53] The former was convinced that the accused was innocent, while the latter held the conviction that Lafarge was guilty.[54] Perhaps more interestingly, as press reports of the trial demonstrate, the media was attendant to the amount of public investment in the trial. The courtroom, as an article in *Le Courrier du Gard* pointed out, was flooded with curious onlookers: "from seven o'clock in the morning, the steps of the palace [of justice] were crowded with a compact crowd, impatiently awaiting the opening of the sanctum."[55] And in another article cited in the *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires,* the onlookers retained their curiosity and apprehension: "Madame Lafarge enters leaning on the arm of her defender. She sits in the accused's seat. All eyes are on her, but we don't notice any sign of intrusive curiosity; the public seems to respectfully await the court's decision."[56] Madame Lafarge's court appearances drew a congregation of the spellbound who waited to be allowed entrance into the court, so that they could see Lafarge in person.

[52] As cited in Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 55.

[53] Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 54.

[54] This thesis will not speculate on Lafarge's guilt or innocence, as I believe it to be beyond the scope of this piece which seeks to delve into discourses about the case.

[55] "Dès sept heures du matin, les marches du palais ont été encombrées d'une foule compacte, attendant impatiemment l'ouverture du sanctuaire."
Quoted in : "Affaire Lafarge," *Le Courrier du Gard*, September 11, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[56] "Mme Lafarge appuyée sur le bras de son défenseur. Elle s'assied sur le banc des accusés. Tous les regards se dirigent vers elle, mais on ne remarque aucun signe d'une indiscrète curiosité ; le public parait attendre avec respect la décision de la justice."
Quoted in : "Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze," *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, September 7, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The middle-class women of Paris are specifically noteworthy for their court attendance. In an article featured in *La Presse*, the observation was made that "around twenty women occupy the first rows of the gallery and the jury bench."[57] Such seemingly inconsequential statements point to the fact that women were invested in the proceedings and outcome of the trial. The reasons for their interest had much to do with the aforementioned romantic cultural context of the Lafarge trial, and as I will show, a fantasy that women harbored the same imagination-borne pathologies as did Marie.[58]

This context helps to explain many young women's perspective on Marie Lafarge. Like them, here was a woman, to their eyes, who was forced to marry against her will, at the behest of her family. Here too was a woman who was taken to her husband's home, far outside of Paris, and away from all she had known; away from the life she felt that she deserved. Middle-class French woman may have seen something in her that felt true to their own experiences, and the social expectations foisted upon them, as carriers of bourgeois values.[59] Hartman argues that it was women's association with Lafarge's experiences which made her an unlikely, but familiar hero for young women.[60] I would agree with this position while I would also argue that one should not underestimate the potent symbolism that Lafarge embodied as living romantic heroine.

Perhaps the reason why many young, middle-class women came to see Lafarge as the embodiment of romantic heroine was due to fact that Lafarge projected this image of herself. According to her memoir, before she married the unfortunate Charles, Marie had enjoyed some

[57] " Une vingtainé de dame occupent les premiers rangs de la tribune et la bane du jury."
Quoted in : "Affaire Lafarge—Vol des Diamans," *La Press*e, May 3, 1841, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[58] Briefly discussed in the context, "The State of Affairs Before L'Affaire Lafarge." For brevity's sake, I did not see the value in rehashing the discussion here.
[59] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 48.
[60] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 48.

romantic dalliances. The second of her three suitors is intriguing, at least in Marie's retelling. During a walk with her friend, Marie had met a man who was snappily dressed and seemed quite taken with the young woman. On subsequent walks,

> he reportedly did do a good bit of following her about, waiting for her in churches, handing her notes and flowers, and standing around beneath her window. They regularly exchanged letters in the Tuileries gardens, but Marie, perhaps wishing to conform to her novel, said she never spoke a word to her admirer.[61]

The book in question was a novel about a man who behaved much like Lafarge's well-dressed suitor; the novel's hero "followed his female idol everywhere, wrote her delicate letters, saved her life, and sought her love without ever daring to approach her."[62] Marie did admit that she "might not have been so enchanted had she not recently been deeply impressed" by this novel.[63] It seems that Lafarge, so emotionally invested in the novel, had in fact recreated the plot in her own life—an act which actually got her in some trouble once her aunt and guardian found out.

The last of her three suitors is even more telling, as in this case, the gentleman was perhaps not even a real person.[64] In this case, as Hartman details, the man had been based on a real nobleman that Lafarge had known. Yet, in Lafarge's memoir, a man that she had likely not known very well became a "charming and immoral…depraved"[65] man who just happened to be devoted to the young madame. He even offered to marry Marie, though it seems that his honor would not let him as he was not good enough for her. All of this dialogue was accompanied, Lafarge claims, by streams of regretful tears.[66] As Hartman points out, the purpose of this story was most likely for Marie to save face[67] and to protect her own self-image: "Marie seems to have

[61] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 25.
[62] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 24.
[63] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 24.
[64] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.
[65] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.
[66] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.
[67] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.

decided that the only safe hero was an imaginary one—or a near-imaginary one—who, if he failed to marry her and carry her away, at least could not hurt, disgrace, or disappoint her. This was the fantasy figure whom she would briefly resurrect" as she tried to find an excuse to annul her marriage to her husband. [68]

Another of Lafarge's gambits to end her new marriage similarly smacks of romanticism. During her honeymoon, Lafarge had come to believe that she must remain virginal, as doing so would preserve her self-image as romantic heroine. In her memoirs, Lafarge recalls that right after her wedding, she saved a flower bud from her virgin wreath and kept it in a locket given to her by her mother. This act seems to represent a promise made to herself that she would remain virginal and served as both a 'souvenir' and 'talisman.'[69] And by all accounts, her symbol served her well. As one scholar put it, Marie "'repelled all of Lafarge's advances on the honeymoon, hysterically believing that to preserve her virginity intact was essential to her survival as heroine'…"[70] We are presented then with a woman who believed that retaining her purity was essential to her own self-narrative. By all accounts, Marie seemed to sincerely believe her life to be modeled on the heroines of her novels. To be pure, noble, and tragic.

Finally, it is important to mention here the incident of her 'mad letter.'[71] After the new couple had arrived at le Glandier, Marie insisted that she be left alone in her apartment. It was then, as she claims in her memoir, that she allowed herself to feel deceived by Charles. Le Glandier, it turns out, was not an 'ancestral home' the likes of which Marie had imagined.

[68] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 26-27.

[69] "…je gardai un bouton de cette parure virginale, et, l'enfermant dans un petit cœur que j'avais reçu de ma mère et qui ne me quittait jamais, je le conservai comme un souvenir et comme un talisman."
Marie Cappelle, *Mémoires de Marie Cappelle, veuve Lafarge* (Brussels: A Jamar, Éditeur-Libraire, 1841), 68.

[70] Cited in Downing, *The Subject of Murder,* 58.

[71] " une lettre insensée."
"Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze," *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, September 7, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Moreover, Charles was not a wealthy ironworker with a successful business. In truth, Marie's dowry would most likely be put toward paying off Lafarge's debts; Marie felt deceived and trapped.[72] She decided then that the only way that she could escape her marriage was to wound Lafarge's pride, so she set about writing a letter that she thought would release her from the bonds of matrimony. During her testimony before the court, Marie explained that in her 'mad letter,'[73] she had claimed that she did not love Charles, that she loved another,[74] that she must be released from the marriage, in which case Charles could keep the dowry. Failing that, Marie claimed that she would run away, or would take arsenic.[75] After writing her letter, she reread it. In her memoir, she claimed that she felt calm; she had the "courage of a warrior who would burn his vessels so that he might hope for victory in death."[76] Thus again, we see a woman who has fully embraced the notion of becoming a real romantic heroine. Her dramatic appeals to be set free, or to die certainly would register with what young, middle-class French women had been reading in their novels about tragic heroines. And in this case, life echoes art. Marie's

> self-dramatizing intellectual and romantic nature, her pride coupled with an inferiority complex, her individualism and scorn for the petty conventions of bourgeois and industrial society, her intense need to be loved, and her feelings of rejection[77]

included in her memoirs, illustrate the fact that "Marie Cappelle was immersed in romantic culture when she moved in with her aunt in Paris in 1835."[78] Thus, Marie's association with

[72] Cappelle, *Mémoirs de Marie Cappelle*, 83.
[73] Published in full in: "Affaire Lafarge," *Le Courrier du Gard*, September 11, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[74] Hartman posits that the gentleman that Lafarge claims to love is potentially the very same imaginary suitor that she talked about in her memoirs.
Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.
[75] "Affaire Lafarge," *Le Courrier du Gard*.
[76] "…je fus calme parce que ma volonté était ferme et que j'avais l'inébranlable courage du guerrier qui a brûlé ses vaisseaux pour n'espérer que la victoire ou la mort."
Cappelle, *Mémoirs de Marie Cappelle*, 84.
[77] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 20.
[78] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 20.

romantic literature can be attributed to both her own cultivated image as well as the fact that young women seemed to associate Marie's life with that of heroines in the novels they read. Further, these middle-class women's saw their experiences echoed in Marie's, a fact which made Marie an unlikely, yet potent folk hero. In the next section, we will see how Marie's kinship with romanticism was twisted against her.

As the trial got underway, the image of Marie Lafarge as romantic heroine was complicated by damning testimony. In the court, Marie Lafarge was reconstructed as a scheming woman whose unhappiness drove her to commit murder. First there was testimony provided by the pharmacist from whom Lafarge bought her arsenic during the month of December, right before her husband's death.[79] The valuable timeline he provided allowed prosecutors to argue that Marie Lafarge had committed premeditated murder, with impunity: "this crime was not enough for her; she had to commit it with perseverance, with unparalleled audacity…"[80] From the earliest moments of the trial, Lafarge's crimes were not understood as part of a noble struggle in the plot of some romantic tale. Rather, Lafarge stood accused of premeditated, wicked murder.

The prosecution was especially taken with the letter that Lafarge had written in the hopes that the fantastical confession it contained would allow her to escape her unhappy situation. During lawyer and friend of the Lafarge family, Mr. Chauvron's testimony[81] as reported by the newspaper, *La Presse*, the 'mad letter' was directly addressed. Chauvron recalled that another lawyer and friend of the Lafarge clan, Mr. Léon Buffières had visited Chauvron and had passed

[79] "Affaire Lafarge," *La Presse*, September 10, 1840, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[80] "…ce crime ne lui a pas suffi ; il a fallu qu'elle le commit avec un persévérance, avec une audace…" "Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze."
[81] I have relied heavily on Chauvron's testimony as I believe it contains the richest commentary on Lafarge's personality and mental state.

along the news that Mr. and Mrs. Lafarge had arrived from Paris to le Glandier. Directly following their arrival, Buffières claimed, one of the "strangest scenes" had taken place, as Marie had written her husband a "dreadful letter."[82] Further, the prosecution argued that the letter should be understood as the central element in the Lafarge murder case: speaking to the jury and to the public, the prosecutor urged that, "this letter, gentlemen, will be the keystone to the accusation…you must return to this letter; never lose sight of this letter for one moment."[83] It is clear by this testimony that Marie Lafarge's narrative as besieged heroine was not going to retain dominance when faced with murder charges. Her argument that she acted out of desperation, as a deceived, but brave warrior, willing to die over being forced to remain in an unhappy marriage was not convincing.

Over the course of the trial, the strangeness of the letter, the situation, and the woman herself had also been remarked upon. The general counsel, as reported in the *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires* appraised the episode most cogently:

> This is very strange…very extraordinary, very strange thoughts from a woman not yet twenty-four years old. This was her first act the same instant that she entered the embrace of an honorable family who had just overwhelmed her with marks of their affection.[84]

He goes on:

> Something more extraordinary happened in her after this letter, in which this young woman states the words poisoning, adultery, like another would pronounce words full of delicacy and love; it is

[82] "…Mme Lafarge s'était enfermée et avait écrit à son mari une lettre épouvantable, à la suite de laquelle se produisirent les scènes les plus étranges."
"Affaire Lafarge," *La Presse*.
[83] "Cette lettre, Messieurs, elle sera la clef de voûte de l'accusation…vous devrez revenir toujours à cette lettre, ne la pas perdre du vue un seul instant."
"Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze."
[84] "Voilà quelque chose de bien étrange, reprend M. l'avocat-général, de bien extraordinaire, de bien étranges pensées dans une femme qui n'a pas vingt-quatre ans ; voilà quelle est sa première occupation à l'instant même où elle est entrée au sein d'une famille honrable qui vient de l'accabler des marques de son affection."
"Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze."

> that a complete revolution would take place in her, and that in her turn she will become full of tenderness.[85]

It was well documented in press coverage of the trial that almost immediately after writing her letter and giving it to her husband, Marie Lafarge became an entirely different person toward Charles Lafarge. She had, it seems, made her peace with being his wife and living at le Glandier. She even was able to convince Lafarge to support her redecoration plans, and to urge his mother to give her the household keys. She was, in short, behaving like a typical mistress of the home.[86] This complete overhaul of her disposition toward her new life certainly would have caught both the court's and press's attention, as I would argue, and as will become clear, this abrupt shift represented a feminine inconstancy and untrustworthiness, even as the change in Lafarge's attitude was accompanied by generally more acceptable modes of wifely behavior.

Yet while the dynamic between Charles and Marie had softened into relative normalcy, there still remained an instability between the couple. In another episode, Mr. Chauvron spoke about his visit to le Glandier at Charles's behest, in response to his wife's demonstrable unhappiness, despite her best efforts to put on a brave face. Lafarge implored Chauvron to talk with his wife to get his impression. Chauvron remembered that after lunch was served, he asked Marie to accompany him on a walk. He recalled that she looked 'sad', and 'beaten-down', and although he posed a number of conversation topics, she 'languished'.[87] He remembers suddenly being afraid that she would commit suicide by throwing herself in the river, so dismayed was

[85] " Quelque chose de plus extraordinaire s'accomplit après cette lettre où cette jeune femme prononce les mots d'empoisonnement, d'adultère, comme une autre prononcerait des paroles pleines de délicatesse et d'amour ; c'est qu'une révolution complète va s'opérer en elle, et qu'a son tour elle deviendra pleine de tendresse."
"Affaire Lafarge—Cour d'Assises de la Corrèze."
[86] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 32.
[87] "Je marchai à la suite de Mme Lafarge, elle était triste et abattue, je faisais tous mes efforts pour exciter la conversation, mais elle languissait."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.

she.[88] Eventually as Chauvron remembers, Marie started energetically talking with him about her plans to restore le Glandier. As the conversation continued, he found that his previous fears about her state of mind had disappeared, yet this fact seemed strange in itself. Chauvron claimed: "this woman…either has great mobility of mind and imagination, which allows her to forget the next day what she wanted the day before, or she possesses the art of pretending to the highest degree."[89] Here, we get a glimmer of the notion that Marie Lafarge is either completely untrustworthy and illegible, or she is pathological. Two distinct testimonies have reported that she was able to completely change her emotional state from one extreme to the other—an ability which struck the witnesses as odd, or perhaps even pointed to the idea that Marie Lafarge had some sort of mental aberrance. We will come back to the connection between pathology and imagination later in this chapter when we discuss prevailing psychological theories contemporary to the Lafarge case.

The reading that she did not behave normally can certainly be supported with later testimony. Again, we return to Chauvron's remembrances of the time before Charles's murder. After his visit to le Glandier, Chauvron went to a race, where he met Charles. There, 'unfortunate Lafarge,' [90] or so Chauvron referred to him, spoke of his love for his wife, feelings that she was seemingly trying to reciprocate. She has been, Charles claimed, much more affectionate toward him, since the 'mad letter' incident. Chauvron took this news to mean that Marie's behavior was a passing frenzy: "the feverish excitement, the fumes, the letter, and the scenes that followed

[88] "Elle avait l'air si triste, si abbatue, si consterné, que l'idée un suicide me vint. Je craignis qu'elle ne se jetât à l'eau…"
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[89] " Cette femme, me dis-je, a ou une grande mobilité d'esprit et d'imagination, qui lui fait oublier le lendemain ce qu'elle a voulu la veille, ou elle possède l'art de feindre au plus haut degré."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[90] 'malheureux Lafarge'
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.

were due to a nervous agitation."[91] Chauvron went on to claim that Charles had confided in him that Marie was a 'delicate woman'—a situation which Chauvron asserts that everyone would understand.[92] After Charles's murder, Marie's earlier neurotic, strange behavior is set in stark new terms. Chauvron claimed that he had tried to avoid making character evaluations of Marie until he became better acquainted with the situation, but as Charles lie on his deathbed months later, Chauvron "came to the realization that [Marie's] behavior was a ploy."[93] Thus, Marie Lafarge's narrative that she was a desperate heroine was somewhat handily undermined by her pathological and purposeful behavior leading up to the murder.

Despite the existence of intriguing testimony that seemed to point to Marie's psychological state, it is compelling that during the trial, neither the press nor psychiatrists discussed the case in explicitly psychiatric terms, despite there being ample suggestion that something was not 'right' with Madame Lafarge. Lafarge's temperament and mental state were highlighted in myriad ways: she was depressed, languishing away at Glandier; she was nervous; she was agitated; she had an excessive emotional affect; she was prone to fancy; she had a highly developed imagination; finally, she was untrustworthy, and perhaps this trait pointed to her guilt. If this case had happened later in the century, I would argue that these very same qualities which proved to be so intriguing to the court, would be repurposed as symptoms instead of mere oddities or eccentricities. Because Lafarge's strangeness was alluded to consistently in the

[91] "Il me donna à entendre qu'il fallait attribuer à une agitation fébrile, à des vapeurs et la lettre et les scènes qui l'avaient suivie.
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[92] " Je crus comprendre qu'il souffrait des confidences qu'il m'avait faites ; et par une délicateuse que tout le monde comprendra."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[93] "j'eus la conviction que c'était un stratagème."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.

sources, I would claim that we may read this preoccupation as tentative suspicions regarding the health of Lafarge's psyche.

Had it happened in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this case would have almost certainly landed Lafarge with a hysteria diagnosis.[94] Lafarge's eccentricities, widely reported on by the press, would have likely caused speculation about her psychology. The question then arises, why did the press and other literary sources seemingly ignore this important interpretation of Lafarge? Possibly more importantly, why did psychiatrists withhold their opinions on the matter? I would contend that the answer is fairly simple. First, throughout the first half of the century hysteria was still a notoriously slippery category that melded old and new theories about psychopathology and women's physiology. There was much uncertainty about the nature, causes, and treatment of hysteria during the first half of the century. Second, in 1840, when Marie Lafarge's trial was underway, psychiatry was still a relatively weak specialization, and it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that psychiatry came into its own as a specialized profession that existed outside of the asylum sphere. For this next section then, I would like to explore hysteria and psychiatry as they existed in the first half of the nineteenth century, in order to make the argument that neither the diagnosis nor the specialization were in a position to intervene in the case or to offer expertise.

In an article for *L'union médicale du Canada*, Henri F. Ellenberger claimed that, '"One could say that the history of modern dynamic psychiatry originated entirely with the study of hysteria'."[95] Hysteria was, in other words, the puzzle box of the psychiatric profession. A more

[94] I will present the French psychiatric context in the next chapter. I have chosen to catalogue this history in chapter two as I feel that keeping this context together for the purposes of demonstrating trajectory is preferable to splitting it up into two partially complete narratives of development.

[95] Quoted in Mark S Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), xvii.

unflattering reading of the malady came courtesy of psychiatrist Charles Lasègue who, again, famously "pronounced hysteria 'the wastepaper basket of medicine where one throws otherwise unemployed symptoms'."[96] During the first half of the nineteenth century, hysteria existed, but the concept was far from being crystallized into its late-nineteenth-century conceptual form. In the first half of the nineteenth century, hysteria was still largely understood in the same way the ancient Greeks understood the malady—as an affliction associated with the women's reproductive organs. Yet even in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, psychiatrists aimed to come up with a more sophisticated understanding of hysteria and other nervous diseases, and to clarify, once and for all, the causes of and treatments for the condition.[97] During the nineteenth century, physicians disagreed whether hysteria and other nervous conditions were caused by an organ, vapors, a lesion on the brain,[98] or various other organic or environmental conditions. By 1840, the debate was largely between psychiatrists who theorized that hysteria was caused by the female reproductive system, and those psychiatrists who believed that the disease was the effect of an organic cause, like a brain lesion.[99]

Crucially, the power of hysteria as a concept lay in its ability to sum up the belief that there was something the matter with women. Another theory on hysteria, for instance, posited that while the precise somatic cause for hysteria—brain lesions or reproductive system—was unknown, it was possible to recognize in woman a 'hysterical temperament.'[100] This understanding of hysteria was based on the recognition that hysterical women shared certain

[96] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify,* 324.
[97] Brachet, *Recherches sur la nature et le siège de l'hystérie et de l'hypocondrie,* (Paris : Gabon, 1832), 20. For more nineteenth-century texts on the debate around causes of hysteria, reference J.B. Louyer-Villermay, Frédéric Dubois d'Amiens, A.L. Foville, Hector Landouzy, É.J. Georget, Félix Voisin, and J.L. Brachet These texts trace the current knowledge of hysteria as of the early nineteenth century.
[98] Brachet, *Recherches sur la nature et le siège de l'hystérie et de l'hypocondrie*, 29.
[99] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 23.
[100] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 24.

character traits like, "eccentricity, impulsiveness, emotionality, coquettishness, deceitfulness, and hypersexuality."[101] Hysteria's symptomology contained a definite moral facet to the diagnosis alongside the psychosomatic. We can clearly see this perspective in J.B. Louyer-Villermay's 1816 text, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs, et Particulièrement de L'Hystérie et de L'Hypocondrie*[102], in which the doctor discusses the moral component of the diagnosis in the section he entitled, "*Causes morales*." Villermay claims that women who enjoy romantic dalliances before marriage are more susceptible to hysteria, particularly if those women are not guided by a savvy mother towards moral righteousness.[103] Love, particularly the unrequited sort can cause an emotional and psychological imbalance that young women are best avoiding.

For our purposes, another section of Louyer-Villermay's text is highly relevant and should also be addressed here. First, he includes a few case studies on young, hysterical women. In one case, an eighteen-year-old girl, who he describes as having a sanguine temperament and a nervous disposition[104] fell ill. Before she became hysterical, Louyer-Villermay describes the young woman as being "sad, dream[y], [and] want[ing] to be alone, [she] did not speak: everything displeased her."[105] When she became ill, this woman's convulsions were also "accompanied by shrill cries, tears or bursts of unmotivated laughter."[106] Thus, there is a sense of

[101] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 24.
[102] J.B. Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs, et Particulièrement de L'Hystérie et de L'Hypocondrie* (Paris : Libraire de la Faculté de Médecine, 1816).
[103] "…elle a franchi la barrière d'un pas léger, en s'étourdissant sur la pente; et des bras d'une mère bienveillante, mais facile à tromper, elle a passé dans ceux d'un amant. Bientôt frustrée dans son espoir, ou arrachée à l'objet de son affection, elle ne peut renoncer à des liens malheureusement contractés, aux plus douces habitudes, à ces illusions trompeuses d'une passion dominante, dont on a dit si justement:
Amour, douce folie,
Épisode trop court du roman de la vie."
Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 40-41.
[104] "…à un tempérament sanguin une très-grande susceptibilité nerveuse."
Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 16.
[105] " Avant leur invasion, cette demoiselle était triste, rêveuse, désirait être seule, ne parlait pas: tout lui déplaisait."
Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 17.
[106] " Peu après, des convulsions générales se déclaraient, accompagnées de cris aigus, de pleurs ou d'éclats de rire non motivés."

over- or inappropriate emotionality on display. To provide further evidence that this text should have been applicable to the Lafarge case, later in the text, Villermay claims that premature widowhood, domestic problems that "wound the heart and self-esteem of a sensitive woman", and anger can cause hysteria.[107] Finally, Louyer-Villermay highlights the fact that an overactive imagination and the reading of 'lascivious' novels are the factors that above all predispose one to hysteria.[108]

While these qualities seem broad enough as to encompass a subset of any population, they absolutely pertain directly to the press's reporting on Marie Lafarge. As we have discussed earlier, it was known that Lafarge had enjoyed some innocent flirtations before marriage—whether real or fantasy—a fact that were "already more than most of her peers would have dared."[109] One of these mystery men—most likely the third, fantastical suitor—was alluded to in Lafarge's 'mad letter' which had been published in newspapers.[110] This certainly seems to fit nicely with Louyer-Villermay's 'moral causes', as her arranged marriage, according to her letter, had torn her away from her lover—a point that Marie gave as justification to leave Charles.[111] Lafarge's engagement in any kind of pre-marital flirtation also might have served as an allusion to a possible hypersexuality, as marriageable, middle-class, respectable women like Lafarge

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Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 17.

[107] "… un veuvage prématuré, des séparations trop longues on trop fréquentes, un abandon plus coupable et plus cruel, des peines domestiques qui blessent le cœur et l'amour-propre d'une femme sensible…"
Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 47-48.

[108] " De toutes les fonctions de l'entendement, l'imagination est celle qui d'abord dipose le plus à cette maladie, et qui par suite la détermine le plus souvent…"
" mais on doit en outre placer ici l'influence si prononcée des lectures lascives, celle des romans et des livres érotiques, de ceux même dont le but est moral…"
Louyer-Villermay, *Traité des Maladies Nerveuses ou Vapeurs*, 48.

[109] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 26.

[110] A full copy was published, for instance, in *Le Courrier du Gard: journal politique, administrative, et judiciaire* on 11 September 1840.

[111] "Affaire Lafarge." *Le Courrier du Gard*, September 11, 1840. Bibliothèque nationale de France.
" Charles, je viens vous demander pardon à genoux ! Je vous ai si indignement trompé : je ne vous aime pas et j'en aime un autre!"

would not have been so daring to entertain such a dalliance, thus her willingness to do so would have necessarily been coded as overtly sexual.

We can interpret the letter in another way as well, as Lafarge's deceitfulness, eccentricity, and over-emotionality were certainly commented upon in regard to the letter, and were framed as emotional disturbance. Immediately upon arriving to her new home, Lafarge wrote a 'dreadful letter', an event which was one of the 'strangest scenes' according to the prosecutor.[112] Days later, her demeanor toward Charles rapidly changed—Marie became 'tender' toward him, or at least as tender as she was capable of being.[113] The rapidity with which her mood was able to shift from extreme depression and anger to tenderness was certainly considered evidence of Lafarge's emotional and psychological instability or deceptiveness. Recall that during his testimony, Chauvron remarked that Charles alluded to Marie's 'delicate', nervous constitution.[114] And later in the testimony, while walking with Marie and witnessing her melancholia, to the extent that he feared that she would commit suicide, he was later stunned when she was chipper and full of good cheer. Chauvron concluded that she was deceptive and that her behavior was all a ploy.[115]

Finally, the very imaginative Lafarge had enjoyed the very same lascivious novels that Louyer-Villermay was certain made women hysterical. Recall that Marie had framed herself as a romantic heroine, and was interpreted thusly by other middle-class women. The fact of her

[112] "Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[113] "Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement." *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*. September 12, 1840. Bibliothèque nationale de France.
" Interrogée comment elle concilie cette tendresse si exaltée et presque mystique du milieu de décembre avec la lettre cruelle écrite le 45 août et la scène d'Uzerche, le 25 août, l'accusée répond qu'elle ne voit aucun rapport entre ces faits et la lettre. 'J'en étais venue, dit-elle, à aimer M. Lafarge de cet amour qui n'est pas de l'amour, mais qui est de la confiance et de l'estime. Quand on reçoit une lettre bien tendre et bien bonne on se laisse aller à répondre de même; je le répète, il était mon mari, je m'efforçais de le rendre heureux autant qu'il était en moi de le faire'."
[114] "Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
" Il me donna à entendre qu'il fallait attribuer à une agitation l'fébrile, à des vapeurs et la lettre et les scènes qui l'avaient suivie. Je crus comprendre qu'il souffrait des confidences qu'il m'avait faites ; et par une délicateuse que tout le monde comprendra."
[115] " et j'eus la conviction que c'était un stratagème."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.

exaggerated imagination will be touched on later, as I believe that this facet warrants its own section. Here however, I'd like to briefly address Louyer-Villermay's concerns about romantic literature. It became something of a sensation that when authorities showed up to arrest her, Lafarge was found next to an open copy of Fréderic Soulié's 1837 novel, *Les mémoires du diable*[116]--an 'unsavory' novel about a young baron who summons the devil. And again, Lafarge even compared herself to a romantic novel in her correspondence when she referenced the novel *Lélia* by George Sand, stating,

> Lélia, whom society has placed on the index, whom women, in their virtuous simplicity, disown and refuse to comprehend. Poor Lélia, who is reproached for her first love, and who has a second one force on her! Poor woman, who has suffered all sorrows, doubts, and discouragement; who was riveted to earth by evil passions and raised to the heavens by sublime instincts; who possessed equally the power for good and for evil; who did not want to be a weak woman, and who was unable to become an angel.[117]

It was well-documented then, that Marie Lafarge partook in the forbidden fruit that was romantic literature. Certainly, given the fact that contemporary theories of hysteria posited the link between the reading of such novels with women's tendency to nervousness, it seems strange that this link was not forged in the Lafarge case during coverage of the trial. At least not to any large degree.

1.4 Fascination and Fantasizing: Social Anxiety Around Women's Illegible Inner Lives

Upon returning to le Glandier in January 1840, Charles Lafarge complained of abdominal pain and was immediately bedridden. He would remain so the rest of his life. His wife was a frequent companion at his bedside, attending to his needs. It would later be argued that it was in the capacity of caregiver that she fed her husband enough arsenic hidden in eggnog[118] to end his

[116] Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 59.
[117] Cited in: Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 49.
[118] "Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement," *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*.

life. Later in court testimony, she would argue that this powdered substance that she was observed putting in his food and drink was merely gum arabic[119]--a remedy for digestive issues—and that she had grown to if not love her husband, then to at least respect him.[120] In her memoir, Lafarge claimed that in December 1839, she believed herself to be pregnant. She hoped desperately for a girl, and thus "'to be raised to the dignity of motherhood by the grace of God'."[121] This strange paradox of caregiving for a husband that she was actively poisoning represented, in broad strokes, nineteenth-century French anxiety about pathological women's inherent illegibility which revolved around fear of threat; in other words, Lafarge's excessive, imaginative, hysterical inner world made her a danger to society.

With this in mind, for the final section of this chapter, I would like to attempt to briefly explore another perspective on the vast public interest in the Lafarge case, and at the risk of sounding a bit meta, I will use this section to analyze the fascination with fascination. *Tout* Paris, and particularly young, middle-class women, were enthralled with this case. This fact has already been discussed in an earlier section, but what I have not yet adequately detailed is the public attention to young women's fascination with Lafarge. I would argue that this attentiveness to the public's, and particularly young women's obsession with this case may point to an underlying anxiety around gender roles, and specifically what women are capable of. The ancient suspicion that women actually have the capacity to commit premeditated, violent acts, and even worse, that they are exceptionally adept at hiding this capacity was again brought to the fore by this case. Finally, to my reading, there seemed to exist a fixation on Lafarge's imagination as a key component to her pathology, while also acknowledging that all women seem to have this same

[119] "Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement," *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*.
[120] "Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement," *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*.
[121] Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses,* 33.

potentially dysfunctional mental landscape. This section will attempt to discuss these perspectives and will argue that mid- to late-nineteenth century Parisian culture was fixated on the notion of women's sophisticated, albeit worryingly excessive imaginations.

Lafarge's imaginative fantasy life was one of the court's and press's fixations during the Lafarge's trial. Recall that when Lafarge arrived at le Glandier, she wrote Charles a 'mad letter' in which she claimed that she loved another and begging him to let her leave the estate and the marriage. Introducing the letter to the court, the prosecutor claimed that when Marie returned to her apartments, she "imagined lethal things that [would] put [the court] on the path of proof which overwhelms her today."[122] Thus, to my reading, the argument was being made that Lafarge's overactive imagination had led her down the path to murder, and that her rich imagination contained 'lethal' ideas that she would later enact. Further, the prosecutor argued that Lafarge's mind held very strange thoughts, strange indeed for such a young woman. These thoughts, Marie's strange imaginings, should be interpreted as dangerous, the prosecutor argued.[123] In a less inflammatory remark, Lafarge was said to be a woman with as much common sense as imagination.[124] Commentary on Lafarge's imagination are not limited to these examples, yet what I have provided is representative of the type of commentary that one sees regarding her inner fantasy world.

[122] "Là, elle imagina quelque chose de fatal qui devra nous mettre sur la voie des preuves qui l'accablent aujourd'hui."
"Affaire Lafarge," *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*.
[123] "Voilà quelque chose de bien étrange, reprend M. l'avocat-général, de bien extraordinaire, de bien étranges pensées dans une femme qui n'a pas vingt-quatre ans… ses mauvaises pensées, ou qu'il en résultat que cette familie fut placée elle-même en présence d'un danger immense, inévitable. Le danger est apparu, et il a été suivi d'une catastrophe épouvantable."
"Affaire Lafarge," *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*.
[124] "Marie Cappelle, en femme de bon sens autant que d'imagination"
"A Propos du procés qui va venir" *Le Figaro*, April 28, 1864. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Lafarge, herself admitted that she had an active imagination. When she endeavored to solve problems, she claimed that, "[her] imagination came to [her] aid."[125] In one instance, she asserts that her imagination was so powerful that it made her sick: "on being taken back to St. Denis, my head was so full of all my pleasures, and my imagination so strongly excited, that at the end of three weeks of regrets and dreams, I was dangerously ill of a brain fever…"[126] Later, sitting with Lafarge outside, she reaches for a flower, and upon seeing her husband's fright at the quick gesture, she says, "you are still pursued by my imaginings of suicide; calm yourself; reason has returned, and my imagination, at times somewhat erratic, is never sovereign—woman *and despot* but for a few minutes."[127] Her reliance upon her imagination is clear as Hartman remarked, it is, at times, "difficult to distinguish fact from fancy in her memoirs."[128] I have already spoken about the fact that she invented a lover in order to present herself as a bonified romantic heroine. Again, this was the same gentleman that she would later use as a reason to leave her husband. Another strange example illustrates Lafarge's dramatism. On occasion, she would visit the Lafarge family's forge, which she

> mentally transformed...into an extension of the family's 'feudal' domains. The establishment was located just down the river from the house, and Marie often visited there. However, her colored and poetic descriptions of the workers' joyous receptions and the flower garlands they ceremoniously gave her suggest that she was fantasizing the part of a medieval chatelaine, with the workmen playing updated roles as happy serfs loyal to their mistress.[129]

In Lafarge's mind, le Glandier and the failing ironworks became 'feudal domains', and evidence that she lived in a romantic narrative—one of a lady who was beloved by her serfs. Of course, this could not have been farther from the truth. It is hard to know how well she was loved by the

[125] Marie Lafarge, *Memoirs of Madame Lafarge*, trans. Unknown (Philadelphia, Carey & Hart: 1841), loc. 3476, Kindle
[126] Lafarge, *Memoirs*, loc. 538, Kindle.
[127] Lafarge, *Memoirs*, loc. 3674, Kindle.
[128] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 18.
[129] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 33.

laborer's, but Charles's ironworks and home were falling into disrepair as a result of the Lafarge family's debt. In reality, this was not the fantasy that Marie had constructed.

French society was keen to understand the way that culture could influence women's imaginations, and under intense scrutiny was the role of romantic literature. As Jann Matlock discusses in her chapter, "Reading Dangerously: The Memoirs of the Devil and Madame Lafarge", Marie's reading habits were a source of concerted focus in the press and among other various commentators—who sought to read her in the same way she read her books. During the 1830s, women's reading habits had been under close examination.[130] We can reference the Catholic conservative journalist, Alfred Nettement as a proxy for this attitude, as Nettement, in particular, had much to say on the matter.[131] Nettement's primary critique was that romantic novels would cause insanity in women: "she will become a '*folle du logis*'

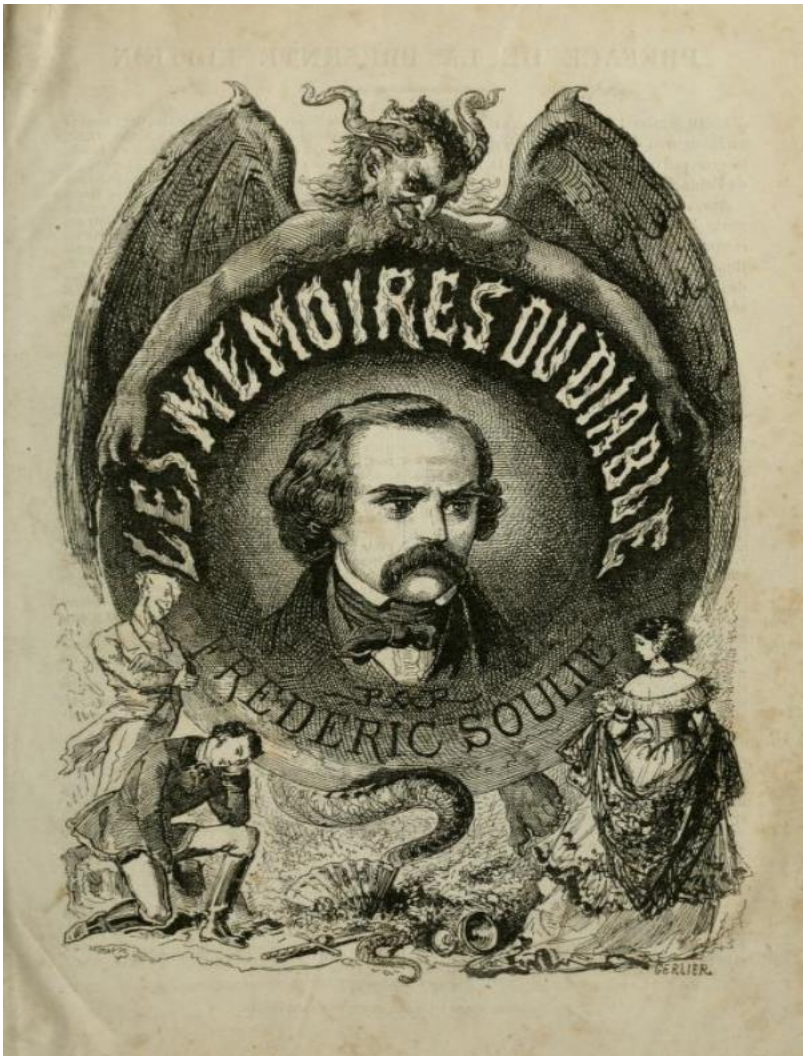

Fig. 2 Frédéric Soulié, Les mémoires du Diable (Paris: 1876)
Bibliothèque nationale de France.
https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2070145.texteImage

[130] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 251.
[131] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 252.

(crazywoman of the hearth), her mind twisted by 'the impassioned and romantic exaggerations of that evil literature'."[132] The crux of Nettement's concern was that after ingesting too much romantic literature, women would begin to hold dangerous expectations for their lives—expectations that tipped into the theatrical.[133] Against this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the press was especially concerned that Lafarge had been reading *Les Memoires du Diable*—a book filled with all manner of sordid details--at the time of her arrest.

All of this consternation was due to the fact that it was thought that women's imaginations were maliciously influenced by base literature, to the point that such readings had the potential to trigger psychopathology. Again, we return to Nettement, who, like many of his contemporaries "were convinced that novel reading produced hysterical girls."[134] In a somewhat disjointed manner, Nettement relays the symptoms he—and ostensibly other psychiatric thinkers—associate with reading such novels:

> Those kinds of strange ideas, those new feelings to which [novels] give birth, that exaltation they paint and communicate, those disordered passions, those frenetic raptures, those unknown excesses, that world of vice they reveal, those violent emotions, those corrosive sensations that develop a feverish sensitivity in the soul, are these not the infallible causes that necessarily beget the effects of which I tried to warn you by recreating a picture so incomplete?[135]

An infinite imagination then, generated by such literature was theorized to have a direct correlation with hysteria. For women, reading is not merely a neutral act, rather, if one digests too much of this type of sordid material, one is likely to suffer a nervous breakdown. For the Lafarge trial, her reading was a subject of close examination, because it seemed that by delving into the novels she was reading before the murder, the state of her imagination could be ascertained and proven.

[132] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 252.
[133] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 252.
[134] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 252.
[135] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 252.

What this fixation on women, their imaginations, and reading material seems to point to are social anxieties about women's illegibility. By focusing on the novels they ingest and the symptoms they present, women may be rendered more understandable, therefore predictable. But as Matlock points out about Nettement, "though he claims to show how women read, he winds up telling how he reads women."[136] Thus, when we read contemporary newspaper articles about Lafarge, we must keep in mind that there was an interest in arguing that the media—like psychiatry—had a way to decode her.

To my reading, these attempts to 'read' Lafarge show up as somewhat incongruous, meta statements. In an article from *the Gazette de Metz et de Lorraine* from September 1840, the author gives a transcript of Lafarge's testimony. Generally, the transcript is straightforward. Lafarge is asked questions by the prosecutor, and her responses are recorded. At the end however, the author includes the following:

> This interrogation, which lasted 3 hours, was endured by the accused with as much cold-bloodedness as presence of mind. It seems to have entirely exhausted her, in the last moments of this ordeal, her voice failed her on multiple occasions. More than once, she let herself fall overwhelmed on the back of her chair, afterwards making painful efforts on her own to answer the questions. A cold sweat bathed her face and made more visible the impression of long, physical and moral suffering.[137]

In this excerpt, the author seems to make the argument that Lafarge's apparent exhaustion is proof of many internal truths. She is cold-blooded, calculating, and has suffered physically and morally, apparently from the effort of hiding her own malice. In the transcript, there is nothing that would suggest that this reading on Lafarge is accurate, yet it is interesting that the author

[136] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 254.

[137] "Cet interrogatoire, qui a duré trois heures, a été soutenu par l'accusée avec autant de sang-froid que de présence d'esprit ; il semble avoir entièrement épuisé ses forces ; dans les derniers moments de cette épreuve, la voix lui a manqué à plusieurs reprises. Plus d'une fois elle s'est laissé retomber anéantie sur le dossier de son fauteuil, faisant ensuite sur elle-même de pénibles efforts pour répondre aux questions de M. le président. Une sueur froide baignait son visage, et rendait plus visible encore l'impression de longues souffrances physiques et morales."
"Affaire Lafarge—Accusation d'empoisonnement," *Gazette De Metz et De Lorraine*.

deemed this interpretation of the testimony vital to include. It could be the case that the author simply knew that French audiences might be interested in these details and was therefore trying to sell papers, but I would still argue that if these sensationalist observations were believed to increase sales, it is because they resonated with the public. I contend that they resonated with the reading public because such details perhaps gave some insight into the mind of the dangerous woman. In other words, including these observations gave the impression that a woman's mind could be read.

In another fascinating article from *La Presse,* the author details the meeting between Chauvron and Marie. Again, much of the transcript is a recitation of the questions and Chauvron's responses, save for a few interesting phrases. After Chauvron describes discussing "politics, music, literature" with Lafarge, and sharing "all of [his] opinions on these various subjects", the author includes the fact that "(a smile touches the lips of the accused.)"[138] Later, Chauvron claims that Lafarge was "good enough to tell [him] that she found much charm in [his] conversation, and that she wished to more frequently enjoy it." After which, the author notes that "(all eyes [were] on the accused, who has just lowered her veil and hid[den] her face from view by leaning on one of her hands.)."[139] This gesture, as reported by the article's author seems to lend Lafarge an air of shyness. She has already slightly smiled at the memory of her meeting with Chauvron, and now she has hidden her face in an almost childish gesture. Finally, Chauvron describes bringing up other amenities available to her at le Glandier in the hopes that he can

[138] "Je causai politique, musique, littérature, et je réussis à lui faire partager toutes mes opinions sur ces diverses matières. (Un sourire effleure les lèvres de l'accusée)."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[139] "Elle voulut bien me dire qu'elle trouvait beaucoup de charme dans ma conversation, et qu'elle désirait en jouir fréquemment. (Les regardes se portent sur l'accusée, qui vient de baisser son voile et dérobe sa figure aux regards en l'appuyant sur une de ses mains)."
"Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.

inspire in her a sense of peace with her marriage and exile to the countryside. Upon hearing this, Lafarge "(pass[ed] her scarf several times over her face, which seems to have *lost its gravity for a moment*.)"[140] This is a crucial bit of information about the author's view of Lafarge. By saying that the charm of passing her scarf over her face has seemed to have worn off on her observers, he seems to be claiming that she is well aware of her audience and how her body language will speak to them. Furthermore, and perhaps more vitally, his interpretation of her behavior seems to imagine that she is a cunning manipulator whose choice of body language at particular moments during testimony points to an awareness of how these performances might suit her. Likewise, another article strangely focuses on her lips claiming that the fact that they are discolored should be read as an indication that she is full of 'bitter emotions.'[141] How one's lips could indicate such a thing is anyone's guess, but what these excerpts make clear is the fact that journalists were absolutely endeavoring to peek into the mind of the murderess.

The question then becomes, why does there seem to be such effort to divine what is going on in the woman's mind? One answer is that nineteenth-century France can be interpreted as a time of coming to terms with women's inner lives—their imaginations, their hopes, fears, and psyches, and the conclusion was reached by some that women were frighteningly illegible. When we consider the fact that one of the trial journalists covered above imagined that Lafarge was hiding her true intentions behind carefully coordinated body language for the sake of her audience, he may have touched a nerve with the nineteenth-century French public. To return to Lafarge's reading habits, the anxiety that she may have learned a few things from her novels was

[140] "(...passe à plusieurs reprises son foulard sur sa figure, qui parait avoir un instant perdu de sa gravité.)" "Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
Emphasis mine.
[141] "ses lèvres décolorés indiquent combien cette frêle organisation a éprouvé d'amères émotions." "Affaire Lafarge." *Le Courrier du Gard*.

a real consideration for critics: "had she read Sand's novel instrumentally, she might have recognized that as long as Lélia remained enigmatic she inspired desire. The mask of virtue, humility, and above all, of feminine morality could satisfy admirers, and elicit the support of those who might help her in her appeal for a pardon."[142] Thus Lafarge's femininity could be considered a farce for the sake of her own devices. This would not necessarily be a problem if Lafarge did not inspire such devotion among her young women devotees, yet Lafarge was well loved by many young women who firmly believed in her innocence, and perhaps some, underneath it all, believed in what she did. While it is hard to be sure, the point is that it would have been hard to discern women's interest in Lafarge beyond speculation, so any conclusion is fair.

The eccentricity associated with Lafarge and her inner fantasy life became a bit more worrisome as young Parisian women flocked to her trial. As previously noted, young, middle-class Parisian women were engrossed with Lafarge and her trial, because they both saw something of her predicament in themselves and because she fashioned herself as a true, living romantic heroine. For the public writ large, this idolatry was not a comfort. During coverage of the trial, the press did not miss an opportunity to mention women's ostensible investment in the case and its 'main character.' The press had generally already put forth their opinions on the case by the time of the trial: "by the time the murder trial began, the press had already tried Marie. Her childhood pastimes, her flirts, her obsessions, her reading, and even her letters to her husband had been displayed publicly."[143] And as I have demonstrated, some of the press's interpretations of Lafarge were not overall positive, thus it was concerning that so many women seemed to idolize Lafarge.

[142] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction,* 254.
[143] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction,* 250.

In many articles, it is noted that the benches reserved for women are crowded with onlookers eager to catch a glimpse of Lafarge, or that hordes of women had been waiting outside the courthouse for hours before the day's work had begun to make sure that they got a seat.[144] One memorable anecdote written in *La Presse* stated that, "the stand reserved for ladies has never been more full or well-adorned."[145] The press also reported on women's activities related to the case that happened outside the confines of the trial. Some women "made pilgrimages to le Glandier, while others contented themselves with purchasing engravings of their new heroine which were hawked on the streets along with special editions of newspapers with accounts of the trial."[146] The press was then highly attentive to women's obsession with the trial and with Lafarge in general. That the press would concern itself with such details points to the clear possibility that the public was also mindful of women's interest in the case. What might this awareness of women's interest have communicated to middle-class Parisian men about Marie Lafarge, and about women more broadly? First, to put it simply, Lafarge resonated with young women. This fact is quite clear. Men, and to be fair, elderly women[147] certainly would have wondered at the appeal that Lafarge held. This question brings us to, perhaps predictably, the spectre of gender anxieties. To discuss this, it is important to return again to nineteenth-century French views of Romantic literature, 'appropriate' gender roles, and women's imaginations.

For young women to admire a woman like Lafarge must have been even more horrifying because it was thought that imaginations made women ill. So, when women flocked to the

[144] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 48.
[145] "la tribune réservée aux dames n'a jamais été plus complète et mieux parée…"
Quoted in : "Affaire Lafarge." *La Presse*.
[146] Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 48.
[147] According to Hartman, "Marie did inspire mistrust in most older women who knew her personally, but some younger unmarried women, at least, were selflessly devoted to her."
Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses*, 47.

courthouse, to le Glandier, and sent letters of love and support to Lafarge, and read the same literature as did Lafarge, the implications were that Lafarge's madness had spread like so many vile contagions. As we have discussed, contemporary theories of madness revolved around the power of women's imaginations. When such a 'nervous' disposition was triggered by debauched tales of hysterical women and their crimes, there existed a real possibility of this pathology spreading: "…because it acts upon her somatically, working through her body to generate desires she did not even know she could have, reading may act as an agent of contagion. Like cholera or syphilis, the dangers of the text may make her the carrier of degeneracy for her family."[148] I would add to this theory two things: first, it was the fact of her intense imagination that made it more likely that what she read would trigger pathology and thus these 'degenerate' ideas. We should not forget that what was feared was the power of women's minds. Second, not only would the plots surge through Lafarge, but her actions may have been contagious in that they planted ideas in other women's heads, therefore it was not merely biological heredity that was feared in the process of appraising the danger represented by a pathological or criminal woman.

To conclude this section, I believe that it is essential that we discuss explicitly the danger that an illegible, 'suggestible' woman represented. Media theorist, Hilary Neroni perfectly encapsulates the threat posed by the pathological female criminal when she states,

> nothing can bring up the discussion of proper womanly traits like a violent woman. The character of the media response to a violent woman is, in almost every case, hysterical. Hysteria is a neurotic reaction in which the subject constantly questions the desire and position of the Other, especially as the Other relates to the subject. … When confronted with a woman's violent act, we immediately begin to question her desire, to wonder why she acted violently. In the manner of the hysteric, the media asks again and again what the violent woman wants, while it also speculates endlessly about the definition of femininity.[149]

[148] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction,* 261.
[149] Cited in Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 57-58.

In Lafarge's trial coverage, and writings about her at large, both the press and experts speculate seemingly endlessly about her motives, debating whether she was a virtuous woman or a viper. These debates speak to the fact that the public was struggling to understand who the woman really was. Was Lafarge a wronged woman who had tried her best to honor her husband before she was wrongfully accused, or was she a woman who murdered her husband from women's traditional sphere—the home? More appalling was to consider whether all women were capable of these actions if only their imaginations were triggered in just the right or wrong way.

The female poisoner held a position of some infamy during the nineteenth century as a result of these anxieties. She was the most feared because she had the ability to profoundly shake the foundations of domestic arrangements and to disrupt bourgeois values at their core. For a conservative regime like the July Monarchy, the woman poisoner was terrifying specifically because she had the ability to invert the safety of the home.[150] She was "the most hideous of criminals, wrote nineteenth-century criminologists, because she destroys the family with a smile on her face. Working under cover, she lives a lie, day by day, emptying the cups of her poison into her unknowing victim…to produce an innocent-looking death. And no one knows the difference."[151] The woman poisoner could hide her 'boundless imagination,' her reading habits, her pathology, and her ideas; she could hide her true self, and no one would uncover her duplicity until she had achieved her ends. Potentially every woman then could hold, in their minds, the potential for violence, enjoying their illegibility until it was time to act. Poisoning is the crime of the woman and the hysteric, and there was no way to know whether she was already plotting. Marie Lafarge well represented these fears and France both loved and reviled her for it—for what they read into her.

[150] Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 63.
[151] Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction,* 263.

1.5 Conclusion

The Lafarge trial had the ability to bring together nineteenth-century cultural threads and to reflect contemporary anxieties. Generally speaking, the nineteenth century in France was politically unstable, and more particularly, the case occurred at a time when the political pendulum had swung toward conservatism. This unprogressiveness in the political realm was manifested in political and social censorship. Women and workers were of particular concern to the regime as they represented a potential challenge to the powerful, but not infallible status quo. Underlaying this paranoia was the mass literacy phenomenon. For the first time, people who had not had access to the written word found themselves able to take advantage of what reading could provide them. The rise of the mass press along with romantic fiction certainly provided the basis upon which the conservative-minded could rest their fears about the social contagion of inflammatory ideas rendered through salacious stories. Women were the source of concerted concern, because it was feared that women, owing to their naturally nervous dispositions could be triggered by what they read. Although hysteria was not a broadly used term at the time of the Lafarge case, the notion of hysterical women, in so many words, was present. Lafarge might have even been diagnosed had the psychiatric discipline been more established in 1840. This point is hard to prove for obvious reasons, but given the fact that Lafarge fit the diagnosis as it existed at the time of her trial, it is worth asking the question. Thus Lafarge, the 'romantic heroine,' and her loyal supporters pointed to the notion that perhaps all women were being exposed to the same dangerous ideas and were harboring the same threatening potentialities—psychopathology and the ability to plan murder from the throne of the traditional, domestic sphere.

Ultimately, despite the anachronism of the term, the Lafarge case can be read as a quintessentially nineteenth-century French moral panic, and I believe that we should understand it in this way. The preoccupation with the reading material women engaged with, the threat they harbored due to dangerous, triggering ideas, and the pathologies they were so essentially prone to speak to this point. It turns out that the Lafarge case was not going anywhere either. It continued to resonate well into the latter half of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. In the next mini-chapter, I will look at the ways that interpretations of Lafarge and her case evolved and changed, especially as the concept of hysteria became dominant, with the hope of tracing this case through a rapidly evolving cultural milieu.

Chapter Two: The Retrospective Diagnosis of Marie Lafarge: Hysteria and the Professionalization of French Psychiatry

2.1 Introduction

In the years following Lafarge's trial, imprisonment, and death, the case did not lose its hold on the public. In 1912, for instance, a French parliamentarian, Louis Martin established a special commission to revisit the Lafarge case on the grounds of expert "ignorance and vanity"[152] and prosecutorial misconduct.[153] What this strange historical tidbit tells us is that the Lafarge case managed to remain intriguing to the French public even long after the trial had concluded, and after Lafarge had been imprisoned and subsequently died. While this fact demonstrates that Lafarge and her crime continued to resonate, the ways that she and her crime were interpreted in the decades after the original trial evolved to include more explicitly psychiatric labelling.

Scholars familiar with the Lafarge case have taken for granted the fact that Marie Lafarge and the murder of her husband can be linked with hysteria.[154] I would argue that this interpretation is a mistake because it allows us to ignore the fact that interpretations about both normative and pathological women evolve. As we discussed in the first chapter, accounts contemporary to the Lafarge trial did not necessarily draw that connection—at least not in clinical terms and not explicitly. In other words, she was not labelled as such at the time of her trial. With that said, one

[152] José Ramón Bertomeu-Sánchez, "The Truth About the Lafarge Affair: Poisons in Salons, Academies, and Courtrooms During the Nineteenth Century" in *Poison and Poisoning in Science, Fiction and Cinema: Precarious Identities*, edited by Heike Klippel, Bettina Wahrig, and Anke Zechner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), loc. 1046-1438. Kindle.
Loc. 1244.
[153] Bertomeu-Sánchez, "The Truth About the Lafarge Affair", Loc. 1244. Kindle.
[154] For example, Downing makes this claim, yet she bases this association between Lafarge and hysteria on sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of her argument that Lafarge was understood to be hysterical rests on Lombroso's work from the later nineteenth century. Downing does not go into detail about contemporary perspectives on the trial versus later perspectives.

cannot ignore the association between later interpretations of Lafarge and hysteria. In this section then, I would like to switch focus to commentary about Lafarge rather than the trial, and to discuss the proliferation of hysteria as psychological category, in order to highlight sources that explicitly discussed Lafarge in this way. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these sources are representative of this shift in analysis of Lafarge to include psychological perspectives. The second goal in this brief chapter is to answer the question of why Lafarge was not considered hysterical during her trial. This change in interpretation between the time of her trial and the 1880s-1890s can be attributed, I argue, to two factors: first, from 1840, when Lafarge's trial took place and the latter decades of the nineteenth century, psychiatry grew in prestige as a specialized profession, thus psychiatric concepts became a reference point or discourse to understand pathology. Second, Lafarge's retrospective diagnosis follows the eminent psychiatrist of the Salpêtrière, Jean-Martin Charcot's clinical work on and demonstrations of hysteria in women. I contend that both of these factors facilitated a public and expert reappraisal on cases that remained resonant with the French public even decades after the case and trial had concluded.

2.2 The Professionalization of Psychiatry and Charcot's Spectacles

The process of creating a psychiatric profession had begun in France by the late eighteenth century, but French psychiatry had a much longer history. Louis XIV had called for the establishment of a '*hôpital-générale'* in each city for the purposes of maintaining order in the urban centers of France.[155] By the end of the eighteenth century, finding cures for madness was made a priority for the first time—a general posture that gave rise to a public facility, the Hôtel-Dieu, a place for the 'curable.' Alongside the establishment of these sorts of institutions, there

[155] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41-

were philosophical shifts; medicine would aim to become the definitive science of man. In the early nineteenth century, doctor of the Salpêtrière, Philippe Pinel published his *Traité medico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale, ou la manie*, a tract that advocated for a 'moral treatment' of the insane. This treatise promoted the experiences and observations of caretakers for the insane and stood in stark opposition to earlier treatments which were not especially known for their humaneness. These treatments were meant to use 'moral' methods to treat insanity, often proposing that using the logic of the mad against themselves was curative. Despite these innovations and institutions, psychiatry remained relatively weak as a specialization apart from medicine until the mid-nineteenth century.[156]

The Law of 1838 proved to be a turning point in the professional development of psychiatry, because it provided the foundation for the creation of a state-sponsored asylum system—an achievement that alienists had been in pursuit of since the early nineteenth century.[157] The basis for this law was both humanitarian and pragmatic, according to Goldstein:

> Minister of the Interior Adrien-Etienne de Gasparin offered two reasons for his assertion that insanity was one of the problems that 'demand most imperiously the solicitude and the intervention of the Government.' One reason was humanitarian: 'to come to the aid of misfortune, to assuage the most distressing of human infirmities.' The second was concern for social order: 'to preserve society from the disorders which these sick persons can perpetrate.'[158]

The regime's interest in promoting care for the insane is perhaps telling, because it suggests that psychiatry was acknowledging the social role that psychiatrists could fill—not only caring for the

[156] Refer to chapters 1-3 of Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, which gives a far more detailed accounting for the development of psychiatry.
[157] In reconstructing the history of psychiatry, I have relied on Jan Goldstein's piece. In particular, I draw on the eighth and ninth chapters which cover the Law of 1838, the statist asylum system, and the growth of hysteria alongside French psychiatry's prestige.
[158] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 281.

sick but promoting order. In other words, as a specialty, psychiatry could prove to be more vital in the interests of deciding who presented a danger to society.[159]

Between 1838 and 1876, as Goldstein demonstrates, French psychiatry underwent an intense 'expansionist' phase. In 1852, the *Société medico-psychologique* was established, quite a feat considering the anti-organization sentiment that existed at the time of its founding. To combat this anti-group sentiment, the founders organized around an explicitly objective scientific intent so that the group could not be mistaken for a doctor's interest group. Despite this victory, psychiatrists still faced anti-specialization biases among general medical practitioners and in the instructional sphere. Among doctors, it was a commonly held belief that general physicians did not need to be educated in mental maladies, rather, they solely needed to be able to recognize insanity so that it was clear when a patient needed to be transferred to an asylum. Such beliefs were dampened by an alarming loss during the Franco-Prussian War, when an argument was made that "France had declined militarily because she had ceded her scientific hegemony to the Germans during the nineteenth century, the war in effect bludgeoned the medical conservatives into treating the reform programs of the medical progressives with respect."[160] As a result of this context, psychiatrists were offered a chair and 'mental maladies' program through the Paris Faculty of Medicine. While French psychiatry still had a long path ahead to institutionalizing, these episodes demonstrate a specialization's burgeoning relevance and authority.[161]

[159] There is far more to this law and its political context, but for sake of brevity, I have included the details that I found to be most salient. Goldstein's chapter on the law does an excellent job of explaining the origins and context for the law.
[160] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 348.
[161] Reference Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 339-350 for more information about these developments.

As I pointed to in the first chapter, during the first half of the nineteenth century, hysteria was considered the 'bête noire' of psychiatry,[162] in that it represented a great unsolvable condition. In other words, it was a disorder "to put it crudely, *of being a woman."*[163] Before Charcot, hysteria had been known by many names in France: 'hysteria', 'nerve attacks', 'vapors', 'melancholia of virgins and widows', 'uterine neurosis', etc.[164] All of which, as touched upon in the previous chapter, make it clear that the causes for and therefore the treatment of hysteria were the subject of much disagreement. Yet cases of hysteria were on the rise: between 1841 and 1842, a mere 1 percent of patients at the Salpêtrière were diagnosed hysterical, but between 1882 and 1883, the patients presenting with hysterical symptoms rose as high as 20.5 percent.[165] Increasingly, hysteria demanded the serious consideration of French psychiatrists.

Then came Jean-Martin Charcot, the Professor of Pathological Anatomy of the Paris Medical Faculty, and the "leading international neurologist of the nineteenth century"[166] who succeeded in developing a new understanding of hysteria. He also, as it were, made a 'spectacle' and a 'circus' out of the malady.[167] Charcot was the first to conduct clinical studies on hysteria using the patients under his care while he was the head of the Salpêtrière—"the 'Versailles of pain,' a receptacle for the (female) sweepings of the city: beggars, adulteresses, prostitutes, the depraved, those afflicted with venereal diseases, the senile, and the insane."[168] During his tenure

[162] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière,* trans. by Alisa Hartz (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 67.
[163] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria,* 68.
[164] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria,* 69.
[165] Goldstein claims that the interests of the physician can account for this rise in numbers of hysterical patients. While I agree with her that we simply cannot engage in arguments that hysteria was some sort of feminist bodied dissent, I am not so sure that we can understand hysteria as solely the provenance of a strategic physician. Part of the story to me is the idea that hysteria represented something real in the body of the patient, and had some level of social contagion, like suicides appearing in clusters on campuses in contemporary times.
Goldstein, *Console and Classify,* 322.
[166] Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Disturbing History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.
[167] Scull, *Hysteria,* 104.
[168] Scull, *Hysteria,* 105.

in the 1860s, Charcot produced a new understanding of hysteria[169]. By arguing that hysteria was both a real disorder—patients were not merely excellent 'actors'—and that it certainly had an organic cause.[170] Hysteria, according to Charcot, "belonged without question to the same family as the many diseases of the nervous system he had already dissected."[171] The hysterical attack, according to Charcot's findings, follow four predictable stages:

> (1) Tonic rigidity; (2) clonic spasms or *grands mouvements*, also called, with a whimsical pun, *clownisme* because of the circus-like acrobatics produced; (3) *attitudes passionnelles*, or vivid physical representations of one or more emotional states, such as terror, hatred, love; the patient, endowed with an acrobat's agility in the second period, was now said to display the talents of a mime or dramatic actress; (4) a final delirium marked by sobs, tears, and laughter and heralding a return to the real world.[172]

Fig. 3 "Attitudes Passionnelles Extase," Salpêtrière Hospital (Paris : Aux bureaux du Progrès medical, V. Adrien Delahaye & Cie., Libraires-Éditeurs, 1878). Yale University Library, Medical Historical Library, Cushing/Whitney Medical Library. https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/15831499

[170] Scull, *Hysteria*, 107.
[171] Scull, *Hysteria*, 109.
[172] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 326-327.

Suddenly, hysteria became a more useable category, as Charcot claimed that his category was applicable regardless of the patient's background—the fits would predictably follow the same patterns.[173]

Importantly for our purposes, Charcot can be credited with disseminating his concept of hysteria to the broader French public. First, through the course of his study on hysterics at the Salpêtrière, he gathered quite a large collection of photographs of women in each phase of a hysterical attack. He later published these in the *Iconographies*—a text that "circulated widely and disseminated the Charcotian vision of hysteria to an audience who could only virtually witness the Parisian scene."[174] Second, Charcot held public spectacles where he demonstrated the hysterical fit and the successfulness of hypnosis in treating[175] the disorder. While these displays did "much to fix the image of hysteria in the public mind" they also demonstrated "masculine dominance, [and] the foolishness and frailty of the female, both were decisively on display."[176] It is crucial to note that hysteria became part of the public consciousness through Charcot's efforts: "the fame of Charcot and his rendition of the hysteria diagnosis spread beyond scientific circles into the realm of the average literate layman. 'To mention the name of Charcot,' wrote a contemporary commentator, 'is to conjure up in the same breath the image of hysteria…a subject discussed over and over, almost milked dry (*rebattue à satiété)* by all the organs of the press'."[177] *Tout* Paris was

[173] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 327.
[174] Scull, *Hysteria*, 122.
[175] I did not spend much time on treatments for hysteria as the subject was simply outside the scope of this thesis. One of the treatments however was hypnosis—a method that gained in popularity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For more on this, Emese Lafferton has written an article that delves into the case of Ilma Szekulics, a Hungarian-born woman who suffered from hysteria. In particular Lafferton's piece explores the relationship between patient and doctor and argues that Szekulics had more agency than would have been suspected. See Emese Lafferton, "Hysteria and hypnosis as ongoing processes of negotiation. Ilma's case from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy."
[176] Scull, *Hysteria*, 122.
[177] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 329.

in on the conversation around women's delicate nervous systems and the malady that largely women fell victim to.[178]

This is an important development in our narrative because it shows us that in the years since Lafarge's trial, hysteria—as understood in psychiatric terms—had become an element of Parisian culture in a way that it was not during her trial. Crime could be thought of in relation to psychopathology. I would argue that this development can account for the reason why Lafarge had not been considered pathological until the latter half of the nineteenth century; simply put, hysteria was not a terribly useful psychological category until later in the century, despite the fact that it had existed for centuries. Likewise, at the time of the Lafarge trial, psychiatry had been relatively weak, thus psychiatrists had not been in a position to advocate for prescience of their theories until later in the century.

2.3 The Retrospective Diagnosis of Lafarge

In what follows, I will illustrate the form that Lafarge's retrospective diagnosis took by referencing and discussing representative sources of this kind of appropriation of her case. In a 1911 edition of *La France Médicale: Revue d'Études d'Histoire de la Médecine,* experts' opinions on Lafarge's psychology are made perhaps even more clear. To begin, Lafarge was accused of being a liar, a thief, and a kleptomaniac, having stolen her friend's diamonds and then lied about having done so, years before her murder trial.[179] One is given the impression that Lafarge even

[178] Charcot also argued that men could fall victim to hysteria in the form of neurasthenia, but between his photographs and demonstrations, the Parisian public arguably walked away with the sense that this was a woman's disorder, and more than that, this was a spectacular woman's disorder as evidenced by the spectacle of ill women that Charcot staged.

[179] "Marie Capelle n'était pas seulement menteuse ; elle était encore voleuse, kleptomane."
"Un Ami de Madame Lafarge" *La France Médicale: Revue d'Études d'Histoire de la Médecine* 1911, 456

believed her own innocence, having maintained her guilelessness in her memoirs—a stance was interpreted as part and parcel of her underlying psychopathology. Later, about Lafarge the claim is made that she was "an undeniable neuropath as demonstrated by her unconscious and gratuitous lies, and fixity of her ideas, like this obsessive fear of arsenic that possessed her."[180] This description of Lafarge, as a 'neuropath' with particular attention paid to the notion of obsession or fixation certainly leads one to the conclusion that Lafarge was being understood as a hysteric, as during the nineteenth century, nervous disorders and conditions like "*surexcitation nerveuse, nervosisme, névropathie*" were thought to accompany hysterical symptomology and were therefore thought to be related.[181]

The reinterpretation of the Lafarge case by both the press and by experts by the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth arguably demonstrates a greater acknowledgment of the role of psychopathology in crime. Certainly, this theoretical relationship only intensifies by the end of the century—a point to which we will return in the next chapter. To support this and the next chapter's aims, it is vital to mention Cesare Lombroso's and Guglielmo Ferrero's *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman.*[182] First published in 1893, this was a seminal work of nineteenth-century criminology. In its pages, Lombroso and Ferrero, lay out their theory for female criminality. *Criminal Woman,* for its polarizing contents[183], "offers a glimpse of one of the earliest efforts to define deviance scientifically and to identify the boundary between normality and abnormality."[184] In the text, Lombroso and Ferrero offer an analysis of

[180] "Madame Lafarge était une névropathe incontestable comme le montrent ses mensonges inconscients et gratuits, la fixité de l'idée, comme cette hantise de l'arsenic qui l'obsédait."
"Un Ami de Madame Lafarge" *La France Médicale: Revue d'Études d'Histoire de la Médecine* 1911, 456
[181] Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, 332.
[182] Cesare Lombroso and Guglielemo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
[183] I will speak about the rift between the French and Italian schools of criminology in the next chapter.
[184] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 31.

various types of female criminals as well as the nature of female criminality. Among these, prostitution, suicide, theft, and crimes of passion are treated in turn.

Among the typologies covered and for our purposes, the treatment of hysterics is most illuminating in Lombroso's and Ferrero's text. Hysterics, according to their framework, have mood instability,[185] they lie compulsively,[186] they steal,[187] and perhaps more inexplicably, they write anonymous letters,[188] and finally, they often suffer from 'delirium.'[189] In other words, "the inability of women to contain their passions spills into violent behavior, disrupting the masculine social ideal of reason."[190] Furthermore, for its inclusion, it is clear that Lombroso and Ferrero considered hysteria a threatening enough malady that it merited inclusion in their thesis. Additionally, in *Criminal Woman,* hysteria seems to be one element of a matrix of pathologies that make women 'mad' and potentially 'bad.'

Marie Lafarge is referenced several times in Lombroso's and Ferrero's monograph as an example of a 'born' criminal woman—one whose particular pathology was manifested in a number of ways. First, as alluded to above, she was a thief. Before she was convicted of murder, Lafarge had been accused of stealing.[191] Lombroso and Ferrero used this event to highlight Lafarge's psychopathology by claiming that "Madame Lafarge stole her friend's diamonds, not to sell them, but only to possess them, even though doing so involved grave risks." In other words, Lafarge had no need for the jewels; she simply wanted to own them. Further, Lombroso and Ferrero state that, "…many Russian thieves steal not out of need (they have jobs and are earning wages) but to obtain

[185] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 342.
[186] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 342.
[187] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 343.
[188] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 343.
[189] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, 344.
[190] Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, 57.
[191] News about that case can be found in "Affaire Lafarge—Vol des Diamans" *La Presse* May 3, 1841. Bibliothèque national de France.

small luxury objects."[192] In the case of this inclusion, it is not so interesting that Marie Lafarge stole something, rather Lombroso's and Ferrero's phrasing points to the idea of fixation. In other words, a pathological woman engages in crime because she feels a need to do so. Lafarge did not need to steal the diamonds, rather, she stole them out of a compulsive drive to possess the object. Such statements are reminiscent of a late-nineteenth-century hysteria diagnosis.

In another section, the text briefly mentions writing as another of Lafarge's ostensible fixations. Lombroso and Ferrero claim that writing memoirs are usually the purview of male criminals rather than female criminals, as the former are more "addicted to these egotistical outpourings."[193] In her chapter on Lafarge, Downing has demonstrated the link between 'masculine behavior' and hysteria. She states that, "the concept of hysteria is inseparable from a notion of femininity as out of control, teeming beyond the confines of its embodiment—tipping over, almost, into its opposite and becoming threatening, aggressive, *unfeminine*."[194] While I am not sure that hysteria should be associated with masculine behavior, it is absolutely factual that a hysterical condition was associated with an excess of emotion, and of emotional affect—a fact that we will see in more detail when we look at the press's interpretation of Lafarge's hysteria. As physiologist Charles Richet asserted, "one could even say that hysterics are more woman than other women."[195]

By the early-twentieth century, both domestic and foreign press seemed to agree that Lafarge's crimes could be at least partially attributed to her pathology. One such article, found in a 1905 edition of *Le Matin: Dernières Télégrammes de la Nuit*[196] aims to discuss the connection

[192] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman,* 277.
[193] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman,* 280.
[194] Downing, *The Subject of Murder,* 57.
[195] Micale, Mark S. *Approaching Hysteria,* 231.
[196] Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur" *Le Matin : Dernières Télégrammes de la Nuit*, June 13, 1905. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

between a type of degenerative hysteria and female poisoners (*empoisonneuses*). The author, one Docteur Ox, opens the piece by claiming that when poisoning is the crime, and if no suspects are readily found, it is always the woman. Poisoning, he states, is the "female crime par excellence."[197] Famous poisoners like Marie Cappelle (Lafarge) and Lucretia Borgia prove the pattern—poisoning, particularly one's spouse is the woman's criminal domain.[198] Traditional knowledge on the subject would have us believe, the doctor claims, that women choose poison as it is the "weapon of the weak." This is accurate, he says, but there is more to the story.[199] The mind of the *empoisonneuse* is more complicated than that of a 'simple criminal'.[200] According to Charpentier, who had just completed his work on the psychology of poisoners, *empoisonneuses* are suffering from a degenerative hysteria—a type of pathology which, Charpentier claims, can be found in most cases of poisoning.[201] Hysteria—a pathology potentially harbored by all women's brains—presents as a series of contradictions: a hysterical woman is

> graceful and disagreeable, sweet and fiery, beneficent and cruel, impressionable to the point of exaltation or impassive to the point of indifference, mobile, variable and without will, and yet capable, in certain projects of extraordinary perseverance and tenacity, hysterics escape any rule other than their whim. Unbalanced in feeling, in will, in morality, what is most conspicuous in them… is their very inconstancy.[202]

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[197] "'Cherchez la femme', disait un policier célèbre, chaque fois qu'une affaire lui paraissait obscure ou inexplicable. En matière d'empoisonnement criminel, la femme est toute trouvée ; neuf fois sur dix, c'est le coupable. L'empoisonnement, est le crime féminin par excellence."
Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur"

[198] "Dans les annales de l'empoisonnement, tous les noms connus sont des noms de femme, depuis Locuste et Lucrèce Borgia jusqu'à Marie Cappelle et Rachel Galtié."
Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur"

[199] "Pourquoi cette préférence ? Parce que, suivant la formule classique, 'le poison est l'arme des faibles'…. Nous sommes aujourd'hui d'une philosophie plus raffinée, et cette explication simpliste ne nous satisfait pas, encore qu'elle renferme sans doute un peu de vérité."
Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur"

[200] "L' 'état d'âme' d'une empoisonneuse nous apparait plus complexe que celui d'un simple criminel."

[201] "M. Charpentier cherche à dégager du groupe des empoisonneuses, dont l'histoire et les annales judiciaires nous offrent de si nombreux spécimens, un type spécial, type à la fois morbide et criminel, qui ressortit à l'hystérie et à la dégénérescence mentale. Pour M. Charpentier, l'empoisonneuse est le plus souvent une 'hystérique dégénérée', et ce type morbide se retrouve dans la plupart des affaires d'empoisonnement."
Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur"

[202] "Tout en elle est contradiction. Tout à tour et tout à la fois gracieuses et désagréables, douces et emportées, bienfaisantes et cruelles, impressionnables jusqu'à l'exaltation ou impassibles jusqu'à l'indifférence, mobiles, variables et sans volonté, et cependant capables, dans certains projets d'une persévérance et d'une ténacité

Had the author not explicitly included Marie Lafarge, these traits would have certainly rung true in her behavior as reported by the press at the time of the murder. What is important to consider here is not only the fact that Lafarge was explicitly included in this article as a type of degenerate hysteric, but also, that it is worthy of our attention to consider the fact that the press was openly speaking about the role of psychiatry in criminal proceedings. I would argue that this retroactive diagnosis of Lafarge can be correlated to the growing inclusion of psychiatry in the juridical sphere.

Once these narratives regarding Lafarge's pathology caught on in France, they were picked up by the international press. In the early-twentieth century, popular accounts remained of two minds about Marie Lafarge: that she was innocent, or that she was insane.[203] Anyone who subscribed to the latter explanation for her crimes argued on the basis that Lafarge was deserving of a retroactive diagnosis of hysteria: "for those convinced that Charles Lafarge was poisoned by his wife, the main arguments revolved around the psychotic personality of Marie Lafarge—sometimes confounded with her alter ego, Emma Bovary—which was described as 'ambitious' with an 'envy of glory, opulence and luxury'.[204] In an article, "Marie Lafarge's Illusions" written for the English paper, *The Weekly Dispatch*, dramatist, Harold Dearden discussed the Lafarge case in light of more recent interpretations.[205] The first half of the article lays out Lafarge's backstory, and recites the facts of the crime for new eyes, but for our purposes, the second half of the article

extraordinaires, les hystériques échappent à toute règle autre que leur caprice. Déséquilibrées de la sensibilité, de la volonté, de la moralité, ce qu'il y a de plus contant en elles… c'est leur inconstance même."
Docteur Ox, "Causeries du Docteur"

[203] José Ramón Bertomeu-Sánchez, "The Truth About the Lafarge Affair: Poisons in Salons, Academies, and Courtrooms During the Nineteenth Century," in *Poison and Poisoning in Science, Fiction and Cinema: Precarious Identities*, edited by Heike Klippel, Bettina Wahrig, and Anke Zechner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), loc 1247. Kindle.

[204] Bertomeu-Sánchez, "The Truth About the Lafarge Affair", loc. 1247. Kindle.

[205] Harold Dearden, "Marie Lafarge's Illusions," *The Weekly Dispatch*, May 13, 1928, The British Newspaper Archive.

is far more compelling. Dearden claims that Marie Lafarge was suffering from "a hysterical turn of mind"[206] as evidenced by her fixation on certain ideas and her imagination. He claims that Lafarge was actually quite similar to soldiers that returned from the Great War in that fixation provides the ill mind with solutions, and soldiers desperate to come home may have fixed on the idea of survival—a fixation that was at once a marker for nervousness as well as a potential coping mechanism. In Lafarge's case of course, in order to 'fix' her situation, poisoning her husband seemed a 'solution,' one that she focused on until she actually murdered him. In a point that seems to support the first chapter's conclusions, Marie Lafarge was controlled by a robust imagination, or so Dearden claims:

> Another form of this fixed idea is seen in day-dreaming. Men and women, debarred by some reason from a life of gaiety and romance, accept the wish for the fact, and carry out their day-dreams down to the utmost detail. … Now, Marie was an excellent illustration of this hysterical type of mind. As a child she had indulged in interminable romances, for none of which she had any foundation in fact. She kept a diary, as most hysterics do; and it is an illuminating book to read. It is filled with the most glowing accounts of adventures in which she played the part of heroine, all of which are obviously untrue.[207]

Dearden authoritatively addresses many of the themes that we followed in the first chapter, yet in juxtaposition to press coverage that was contemporary to the trial, this article posits that Marie Lafarge should be understood as a hysteric. Her fantastical thinking and link to romanticism have all been recast as symptoms rather than quirks which corresponded to too much exposure to romantic literature. Such an interpretation certainly makes the point that hysteria—as a psychiatric label—had become a more useable term since 1840, as articles like this read as 'common sense' readings on old cases about women criminals. In other words, of course she was ill… who would think otherwise?

[206] Dearden, "Marie Lafarge's Illusions."
[207] Dearden, "Marie Lafarge's Illusions."

2.4 Conclusion

In 1840, I have argued that Marie Lafarge was thought to be imaginative, infatuated with romanticism, strange, eccentric, and a murderer. All of these interpretations made it into press accounts of the trial and case. Yet, to my reading, no one would have added 'hysterical' to this list until the late nineteenth century, despite the fact that in twentieth- and twenty-first-century retellings, it has been taken for granted that Lafarge emblematized the nineteenth-century hysteric. This discrepancy between contemporary and more current readings of the case makes the argument that something occurred between 1840 and the latter half of the century to create this strong association between Lafarge and the 'bête noir' of early French psychiatry. I contend that this occurrence was the growth and empowerment of psychiatry and Charcot's demonstrations of hysteria. While psychiatry had not been strong enough to pervade the culture in 1840, by the late nineteenth century, the field had more thoroughly established itself as a discursive authority on the behavior and psyche of aberrant women (and men). When we pair Charcot's 'educational' demonstrations alongside the burgeoning power of psychiatry, we start to understand the potency that such discourses carried, particularly when applied to objects of social anxiety. Thus, even a case that had long been solved was open to new interpretations which could dispel old mysteries and soothe timeless fears in a way that proved persuasive indeed.

Chapter Three: The Degeneration of Marguerite Steinheil?: Anxieties about Social Decline Written into the Body

Fig. 4, "L'Affaire de l'impasse Ronsin – Marguerite Steinheil: [carte postale], (1909), Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://bibliotheques-specialisees.paris.fr/ark:/73873/pf0000858892/v0001.simple.selectedTab=record

3.1 Introduction

In November 1908, Marguerite Steinheil was found tied to her bed in her home at the Impasse Ronsin. Her mother and husband, who had also been at home with her were found dead of apparent strangulation. During her questioning by police, Steinheil had a truly bizarre story. Three men in long robes with wild beards, and one red-headed woman had broken into her home, stolen some valuables, and murdered her mother and husband. When this story did not prove factual, Steinheil claimed that another man had committed the crime, and when that story was again proven inaccurate, Steinheil pointed the finger at yet another man. Finally, Steinheil herself was arrested for the crime.[208]

As soon as the bewildering story reached the public, questions arose regarding Steinheil's mental state. Was she capable of the crime of which she was accused? She was clearly a liar, but was she suffering from some dangerous psychopathology? In an issue of *Le Petit Parisien* from November 1908, journalist R. Deuzebes interviewed an alienist and posed the question of Steinheil's psychological state. The doctor's reply is noteworthy: he claimed that while he had not examined her himself, and therefore could not speak with any certainty regarding her mental health, it was possible, or even probable that she "presents signs of mental degeneration, [or] psychic flaws." [209] It is clear that this interpretation is quite dissimilar to the discourse that revolved around Marie Lafarge at the time of the 'Affair Lafarge.' As I have shown in the first

[208] Later in this chapter, I will more thoroughly delve into Steinheil's background and the details of the crime.
[209] "Il est possible, il est probable qu'elle présente des stigmates de dégénérescence mental, des tares psychiques." R. Deuzebes, "Le Mensonge morbide devant la Médecine," *Le Petit Parisien*, November 29, 1908. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

chapter, Lafarge's mental state was not broadly commented upon until decades after her trial. In this case however, Steinheil's psychological status was immediately brought into question.

Beyond that, we are presented with a framework--degeneration (*dégénérescence*)—with which to understand Steinheil's mental landscape. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social atrophy was a common interpretation among experts to account for the state of modern French society. According to this theory, France was trapped in a condition of national decline—a mode of being that encompassed a broad range of social concerns, including rising crime rates, plummeting birth rates, rising cases of insanity as well as disorders like hysteria, constant poverty, political turmoil, urbanization, and the introduction of a 'new woman' who seemed to be shirking her domestic responsibilities in favor of emancipation.

As a result of these perceived problems, psychiatrists, criminologists, and neurologists put forward the theory of degeneration, which could account for these social ills. Informed by the hereditarian mechanisms present in Darwinian and Lamarckian theories, the concept of degeneration argued that French society's decline could be explained by biological changes in the population. Modernity, according to this theory, was triggering mental disorders, which were then passed down to children, thus increasing the prevalence of degeneration in the populace. While there existed diversity in the theory, the basis of nineteenth-century degeneration theory can be ascribed mainly to the idea of heredity. On the other hand, psychiatry had, from the latter half of the nineteenth century been suffering from public mistrust even as the profession was increasingly empowered as a specialization. Moreover, because the belief that psychiatrists could actually cure patients was in question, degeneration theory helped to explain social atrophy and allowed psychiatrists to build consensus around a new theory, and to emphasize the hereditary

foundations of mental disease. Thus, psychiatry was not necessarily to blame for their low cure rates.

Importantly, degeneration could explain rising crime rates, by arguing that criminals may inherit a predisposition to crime. In this vein, two schools of thought—the French and Italian—rose to the fore. The Italian Schools, led by Lombroso, focused reading criminality in the morphological features. In other words, one could discern a criminal 'type' from a normal 'type' by studying faces. Criminals, to this manner of thinking, shared certain degenerative characteristics that would point them out as such. The French school led by Lacassagne, on the other hand, was largely cynical of this approach, and emphasized the role that society played in creating criminals. It was the milieu that made people sick. Both schools however, agreed on the vitalness of heredity in notions of degeneration.

The purpose of this chapter then is similar to the first chapter's aims; my goal is to study interpretations of the Steinheil case, and to understand the ways in which perspectives on the intersection between crime, women, and pathology informed these understandings in context. While the first chapter focused almost exclusively on hysteria as an increasingly powerful theory of psychopathology in women, I would argue that even as hysteria is mentioned here as well, Steinheil's case should be primarily understood through the lens of degeneration theory—a category that still functions as a response to and cause of societal ills.

As such, the first section of this chapter will examine the political and sociocultural climate between 1840, when the Lafarge trial took place and the late nineteenth century upon the establishment of the Third Republic. To be sure, this chronicle will not be exhaustive, rather, it will serve to make a pointed statement about the continued instability of French society from the 1840s onward, particularly in regard to developments involving women. The second brief section

will provide necessary information about Steinheil's personal history in order to foster familiarity with some of the themes that were resonant in trial coverage. Namely, information about Steinheil's parents and her life in Paris following her marriage to her husband, Adolphe will be referenced by both experts and press alike. In the third section, I will begin by introducing the concept of degeneration theory, in order to discuss the ways that the Steinheil trial was scaffolded, more or less by these ideas. In this chapter, I argue that like Lafarge's, interpretations of Steinheil's case should be understood in relation to gendered social anxieties, and expert language gave the necessary terminology—primarily that of degeneration—to make more comprehensible fears represented in this case.

3.2 The State of Affairs Before l'Affaire Steinheil: "A Knife Being Sharpened"[210]

Between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, France underwent still more socio-political instability. The July Monarchy under Louis Philippe was brought to an end by a series of popular revolts over a combination of rising prices, stagnating wages, and corruption in government. As a result of these uprisings, Louis Philippe abdicated the throne and fled to Britain where he died in August 1850. Despite the fact that a republic was declared on 4 May 1848, economic problems were not alleviated. Following the fall of the July Monarchy, unemployment reached extraordinary highs: up to 50% in Paris.[211] For the working class, the provisional government of the Second Republic did not seem up to the task of mitigating the hardships that faced the poor, which included horrifying living conditions, high mortality rates,

[210] Refers to a quote by poet Heinrich Heine in which he describes the tone present in Paris in 1842. Quote alludes to the toll of poverty on the city, and to the fact that violence will come as a result of inequality. Quoted in: Jonathan Fenby, *France: A Modern History from the Revolution to the War with Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 86.
[211] Fenby, *France*, 105.

and the flooding of rural workers into the city to look for work.[212]As a result, revolts again broke out and the republican government turned troops on the insurgents. After days of bloody fighting, Louis-Napoleon, the nephew of Bonaparte won a strong majority in the December election of 1848 after having endeared himself to the workers and having promised order to the conservatives.[213] Within the first months of his presidency, Napoleon installed friends in key positions of power and solidified the support of the people, the bourgeoisie, and religious conservatives. In December 1851, Napoleon launched a coup, sending troops to take newspaper offices and to arrest key politicians. A new constitution was drafted giving the "head of state a ten-year term and making ministers dependent on him alone… the National Assembly was cut to 300 members. The press was subjected to controls"[214] and general corruption abounded. Napoleon III would rule for almost eighteen years, and the dream of republicanism would again be forestalled.

In international affairs, France did not fare much better than in the domestic. The question of Spanish royal succession inflamed tensions between France and an increasingly powerful Prussia. For Napoleon, the idea of a Prussian-born ascending the throne after Queen Isabella's abdication was inconceivable. After a diplomatic faux pas that was manipulated by Bismarck, and encouraged by hawkish ministers, France declared war with Prussia on 19 July 1870. Immediately, the war did not go according to plan for France. There were many supply and artillery shortages, and the army was ill-prepared and inadequately organized. After losing in Metz and being driven back to Sedan, where they were surrounded, Napoleon and 21,000 French prisoners were taken. Napoleon surrendered to Bismarck on 2 September. Parisians were furious.

[212] Fenby, *France*, 111.
[213] Fenby, *France*, 116.
[214] Fenby, *France*, 121.

When the loss was announced, a crowd swept into the Tuileries and the empress fled to Britain. Napoleon was released by the Prussians after six months, and joined his wife in England, where he remained until his death in January 1873.[215] The siege on Paris between September 1870 – January 1871 by Prussian forces wore out the last of French resolve. With no backing imminent from Russia, Austria, or Britain, and with Bismarck having rejected a monetary offer to settle the conflict, Prussian and French leadership sat for negotiations at Versailles. After the startling announcement of German unification in the Hall of Mirrors, a treaty was signed at the end of February that accorded Prussians a large sum of money as well as ceded the territories of Alsace and part of Lorraine. Following the agreement, German troops marched along the Champs-Élysées in a dramatic embarrassment that would have a damaging effect on the French psyches.[216]

In early February 1871, an election was held, and the new parliament named Adolphe Thiers as the chief executive of the Republic. The election saw the National Assembly composed mainly of conservatives and royalists, while Paris remained largely working-class and republican. Still stinging from defeat and humiliation at the hands of the Prussians, leftists held a series of demonstrations "calling for a 'democratic and social republic' and the arming of civilians."[217] Tensions had been building between the newly elected national government and working-class Parisians, as the assembly announced that the rent owed to landlords during the war could now be immediately retrieved. Further, pawnshops, which had heretofore been ordered to hold all items that Parisians sold during the war were informed that they could sell,

[215] Fenby, *France*, 147-160.
[216] As Robert A. Nye discusses in *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*, this loss proved to be particularly resonant for the French public. In the aftermath, as we shall discuss in more depth later in the chapter, Lamarckian ideas of heredity, which had not proliferated broadly earlier in the century, experienced a marked period of vitality after the Franco Prussian War.
[217] Fenby, *France*, 165.

despite the fact that working-class people still had no means to buy their items back. Lastly, during the Prussian march through Paris, the National Guard had hoisted cannons into neighborhoods like Montmartre where the Guard was sure that they held the high ground to be prepared in the case that Germans reignited conflict. In mid-March, Thiers sent French army troops to remove these cannons—a decision which inflamed tensions between French army soldiers and workers allied with National Guardsmen. Thiers and the national government left Paris for Versailles, and two generals were killed the same day.[218]

With the withdrawal of Thiers and the government, Parisian leadership declared self-rule and instated a newly elected municipal council, after an agreement with Versailles could not be reached. Thiers began building up the national army at Versailles while the National Guard, allied with the Communards was untrained, undisciplined, and unprepared for battle with the French army. After a couple skirmishes in Courbevoie and a suburb of Neuilly resulted in losses for the national guardsmen, Communards planned to march on Versailles—a decision that would also prove disastrous for the Commune. Thiers responded to this attempted assault by bombing Paris and executing prisoners, while the Communards responded by capturing hostages. As the fighting continued, fears of an imminent invasion increased in the Commune—fears which did bear out when on 21 May, the army entered Paris, executed the Commune's leadership, and fought the Communards in their barricades. The Paris Commune concluded with a series of trials, incarcerations, and exiles of Communards.[219]

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[218] Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 14-23.
[219] Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 14-23.

Concomitant with the events discussed above, from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, France saw a series of gendered socio-cultural shifts. Changes in education present us with a clear example of these changes, as reforms in this sphere touched both gender and class. During the late 1870s and 1880s, arguments in favor of educating women reached new heights. This was, seemingly, in response to the Franco-Prussian War and anti-clerical sentiment among Republicans, who contended that France needed to establish a strong "secular and national educational system" that would build civic values in citizens.[220] The law of 9 August 1879, "was concerned to ensure that teaching in girls' primary schools was carried out only by trained, qualified teachers, and [the] legislation stipulated that every department now had to have at least one training school (*école normale*) for women primary teachers."[221] An additional law crucial to achieving these aims was put forward in June 1881, and "provided for free and secular education for all children, girls as well as boys. Compulsory attendance between the ages of six and thirteen was required by the law of 26 March 1882."[222] Yet another, the Sée Law of December 1880, created higher education opportunities for girls, and served mainly lower middle-class girls—an outcome that was neither planned for, nor expected.[223] Finally, young women were able to access entrée to Latin classes, a development that allowed girls to sit for the *baccalauréat*, and therefore attend university.[224] As a result of these laws, women could gain admission to a career, like teaching, which had been previously barred to them. On paper at least, women's access to education and some level of career opportunity seemed to be approaching parity with that of men.

[220] McMillan, *France and Women*, 144.
[221] McMillan, *France and Women*, 145.
[222] McMillan, *France and Women*, 145.
[223] McMillan, *France and Women*, 145-146.
[224] McMillan, *France and Women*, 147.

Other important developments for French women occurred in the economic and legal spheres. Between 1881 and 1886, women were able to open bank accounts without their husband's agreement, and by 1907, women could spend their money as they liked, without apprising or informing their husbands. In yet another stunning victory for women, divorce was again legalized in 1884. Four bases for divorce were written into the law: "Adultery; *excès et sévices* (physical violence inflicted by one spouse on the other); *injures graves* (a very flexible category which amounted to virtually any kind of moral cruelty); and finally *condemnation afflictive et infamante*, which would apply in the case of, say, a spouse sentenced to life imprisonment."[225] After this law was passed, divorces rose drastically, making the argument that these pieces of legislation were sorely needed, as women requested divorces in far higher numbers than did men.[226] Finally, women also staged highly visible demonstrations in favor of suffrage. One such suffragette, Hubertine Auclert, used Bastille Day to make their argument: "she and a number of her supporters from the Droit des Femmes group paraded their banner decked in the black crêpe of mourning to the Bastille monument, where Auclert roundly denounced the contemporary Bastille which continued to imprison women—the Napoleonic Code."[227] While many of these changes were not entirely and immediately transformative, what is clear is that women had made some respectable inroads toward achieving some form of equality.

While the aforementioned victories should certainly be understood as such, one should not get the impression that gender equality was even close to attainment for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French women. For most women, these gains did not generate critical changes

[225] McMillan, *France and Women*, 153.
[226] McMillan, *France and Women*, 152-153.
[227] McMillan, *France and Women*, 189.

in their daily lives. First, and despite a noble effort put forward by women like Auclert and groups like Droit des Femmes, women did not attain suffrage until 1944. This was quite late for much of Europe. For example, Austria granted suffrage to women in 1918, likewise Germany, and women in the United Kingdom were given the full right to vote by 1929. Divorce too, while technically enshrined in law was difficult to obtain, and was even more complex for women, who were more hindered with the burden of proof in cases of adultery than were men.[228] In education, while women technically could benefit from higher education, it was not until 1912-1913 that the "proportion of French women students exceeded that of foreigners" and even if women did pursue higher education, many bourgeois parents were not invested in their daughters' intellectual accomplishments.[229] To clarify matters further, the impetus to provide girls and women with educational opportunities was undertaken by republican leadership as a method to spread anti-clerical sentiment by increasing civic values, and was not some sort of feminist objective. Moreover, many bourgeois women discontinued their coursework upon the occasion of their marriage. Finally, while it is the case that women were able to take advantage of their entrée to highly skilled careers, women still comprised a startling low number of workers in those professions: before 1914,

> women constituted only a tiny fraction of the legal profession—0.29%. In medicine, they may have made up 49% of the profession as a whole, but this impressive figure reflects their presence in the almost exclusively feminine professions of midwife (100%) and nurse (96%) as well as the majority (68%) of hospital personnel. Those who were actually doctors numbered only 573 in 1906—3% of the profession.[230]

Certainly, women had made inroads into academic and professional spheres, and some economic and legal outcomes were fairer, but the idea that women had achieved any kind of complete

[228] McMillan, *France and Women*, 153.
[229] McMillan, *France and Women*, 148.
[230] McMillan, *France and Women*, 149.

parity with men by the early twentieth century is absurd. In other, perhaps more cogent words, women's progress, particularly in the field of education "over the period 1870-1914 was undoubtedly real, but it was also slow and undynamic."[231]

With these caveats in mind, the limitations on women's humble victories were lost on contemporary men who feared the appearance of yet another iteration of the 'new woman' trope. Perhaps the harbinger of this new type can best be emblematized by the *Pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune. These oft-mythologized women were believed to have started fires during the Commune in an anarchic frenzy.[232] In 1848 too, the idea of a new, 'liberated' woman who neglects her household and family in the interest of pursuing economic, professional, and electoral equality proliferated. Such fears proved to be cyclical throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To some men, these stereotypes represented the dangerous extremes to which the 'new women' might venture if left to her own devices. Many of these stereotypes were also born in and disseminated by literature. Marcel Prévost warned that, there was a new "female type which he classified as *demi-vierges,* young women in fashionable Parisian society who reputedly flouted all the genteel conventions to which modest, well-brought-up young girls were expected to adhere."[233] To Prévost's thinking, these women were, in other words, discarding their traditional roles in favor of emancipation. These women could be recognized by their new attitudes and clothing. In early alarmist literature, the 'new woman' could be seen riding a bicycle in simpler, less restricting clothing. Corsets and long, layered skirts were replaced with "knickerbockers, bloomers and skirts"—items of clothing that "were adopted to free women's

[231] McMillan, *France and Women,* 148.
[232] For more on this subject, reference the fifth chapter, "Les Pétroleuses" of *Unruly Women of Paris*.
[233] McMillan, *France and Women,* 142.

lower bodies and legs for the business of pedaling their bicycles."[234] The worry that such liberties would lead to a sexless, genderless world appeared as a result of these slight changes.[235]

As the nineteenth century wore on, reactionaries found tangible reasons to fear women's liberation. Toward the latter half of the century, France's falling population became a source of consternation. To be sure, the fixation on population decline was not entirely unfounded: "in 1871 France had a population of 36.1 million: by 1914 it numbered 39.6 million, an increase of only 9.7%, whereas the German Empire had grown by 57.8% from 41.1 million to 64.9 million in the same period. By 1911 France had the smallest proportion of young people (under 21) in Europe…"[236] Thus it is easy to see how these fears mapped on to questions of women's rights. The more emancipated the women, or so the fear held, the more that she may turn her back on her traditional and natural roles as mothers and wives. Especially after the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War, the notion that Germany might grow at an alarming rate while France's population stagnated proved to be a highly precarious situation indeed. For many then, "the new woman was most commonly represented as a dangerous creature, masculinized but man-hating, emancipated politically and sexually, a perversion of the natural order of things and a threat to morality and civilisation itself."[237] It seems that the 'new woman' carried on her back—or in her womb—the burden of securing France's security and prowess on the world stage. Berenson summed the period up best when he said:

> This French preoccupation with gender—and with marriage, divorce, and the family as well—resulted in large part from fears following the country's defeat by Prussia in 1870 and from a perceived decline in French power that commentators related to moral decay and to changing relations between the sexes. If France was weak, writers commonly

[234] McMillan, *France and Women*, 143.
[235] McMillan, *France and Women*, 142.
[236] McMillan, *France and Women*, 141.
[237] McMillan, *France and Women*, 143.

> asserted, its weakness stemmed from a growing demographic deficit caused by the emancipation of women, the legalization of divorce, and the emasculation of men.[238]

Such fears of social decline were echoed in nineteenth-century psychiatry as well. As Ruth Harris has demonstrated in *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle*[239], by the end of the nineteenth century psychiatrists were a far more present force in public life.[240] While the threat of social ills was unquestionably framed as a moral threat, psychiatrists' and physicians' increased omnipresence in society also ensured that these threats were interpreted through scientific discourse. And doctors were able to appropriate the tenor of religious moral rhetoric, but without overt religious overtones. Physicians were 'prophets of progress' who were the "embodiment of certain moral and social philosophies, ideals, and aspirations, and they argued for more moderate societies free from threats associated with excessive living.[241] While fin-de-siècle psychiatrists had liberated themselves from clerical morality, they still worried about social regression. To them, clear examples of social decline were pervasive—"everywhere medical men saw danger, in the collapse of moral values within the bourgeoisie, as well as in a resistance to authority among the lower orders, and [they] recommended sometimes radical intervention to avoid further destabilization."[242]

For psychiatrists, understanding the root causes of regression was of paramount importance, as their ability to offer solutions relied upon comprehension of the larger problem. Two intertwining factors deserve our consideration: first, the role of heredity, and second,

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[238] Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 11.
[239] Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[240] Harris, *Murders and Madness*, 11.
[241] Harris, *Murders and Madness*, 11.
[242] Harris, *Murders and Madness*, 13.

physiological bases for psychopathological behavior. Heredity deserves a section on its own, so we will deal with this concept later in the chapter when we speak about degeneration theory, thus for now, I will briefly discuss physiology. As Harris shows, the science of physiology came of age in the late nineteenth century, and by the fin-de-siècle, psychiatrists sought organic causes for disease.[243] Theorizing about women's maladies, for instance, particularly made use of physiological conditions: "beset by a biological life cycle that was deemed to be fraught with periods of instability—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation—women were considered to go through periods of insanity which sometimes led to horrifying crimes against themselves, their children, or their mates."[244] These biological theories of madness proved relevant to court cases. Harris offers the case study of a wet-nurse who was tried for attempting to poison the child of her employers. The psychiatrist on the case "Auguste Motet, sought to determine whether the deed was due to a 'morbid impulsion', to an unstable character, or to the physiological changes produced during lactation."[245] Because of these biological imperatives, all women were believed to be especially prone to insanity—a suspicion that I argue underlies interpretations of the Steinheil case.

To explore the ways that theories on national degeneration[246] underpinned the Steinheil case, it is first necessary to discuss the concept and its particular context. During the latter

[243] The search for neurological/organic bases for psychopathology started much earlier. For example, in the early 1860s, French surgeon Paul Broca was able to link neurological structures with motor functions. Thus, I am not claiming that looking for organic roots to mental conditions was entirely new, rather, the way that lines blurred between criminology, psychiatry, and physiology/neurology was new, as these sciences were institutionalized and imbued with authority to an extent that they had not been previously.

[244] Harris, *Murders and Madness*, 35.

[245] Harris, *Murders and Madness*, 35.

[246] Here, it may be useful to reference Nye's thinking on the relationship between heredity, adaptation, and degeneration: "But what if the environment alters in such a way as to produce responses from the organism that are successful in the short-run task of adaptation, but potentially dysfunctional to the organism in the long run—in other words, an adaptation that the organism experiences as a pathology? It was this 'problem'—a modern one with an intellectual history of its own—that produced degeneration theory."

decades of the nineteenth century, degeneration theory represented a synthesizing of ideas around French national decline.[247] As discussed in the context of this chapter, France had undergone several tumultuous decades throughout the nineteenth century—the peaks of which saw war, poverty, and social unrest, as well as rapid population stagnation and eventual decline—instabilities all reflected in titles of the time:

> the early 1870s had brought a flood of works in France whose very titles evoked the sense of political impotence and national catastrophe: *La Fin du monde latin, 1871! Les Premières Phases d'une décadence, Des Causes de la décadence française, La Chute de la France, République ou décadence?, La France dégénérée.*[248]

Equally troubling to the population free-fall were the rising rates of crime and insanity. Just as Saint Simonians theorized that society would naturally orient itself toward progress and science, crime was steadily climbing: "'It is very certain,' concluded French criminologist Henri Joly, 'that crime is on the rise everywhere.' In France, in the fifty years between 1838 and 1888, the general crime rate increased by 133 percent, he noted."[249] Among the crimes that contemporaries considered particularly unnerving was prostitution, which corresponded to anxieties about the 'new woman' and the decline of traditional motherhood and family.[250] Equally frightening to reactionaries was the belief that for "every one hundred male participants in the 18 March insurrection of 1871, twenty-five were recidivists and twenty-five of every hundred women were

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-Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 121.

[247] For more information on the process of synthesis in terms of degeneration in the médico-psychologique community, reference Ian Dowbiggin's chapter, "Degeneration and Hereditarianism in French Mental Medicine 1840-1890: Psychiatric Theory as Ideological Adaptation" in the volume, *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, edited by W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd. This chapter provides an overview on the development, and eventual hegemony of the theory of degeneration, and the ways in which this hereditarian theory proved to be a new 'cornerstone' for a psychiatric profession that was under attack between 1840 and 1890.

[248] Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 97.

[249] Susan A. Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy: Anatomies of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), Loc. 369. Kindle.

[250] Pick, *Faces of Degeneration,* 98.

prostitutes."[251] It did not help matters that the press, in a bid to sell more papers, highlighted crimes of all varieties, thereby creating the perception that crime was perhaps more rampant than it actually was. News reports on crime "fed the fears that they exploited. The usual suspects—the down and out, habitual offenders, and perverse individuals—fed the crime wave. But women and the well-established also entered the annals of crime, reinforcing the unsettling impression of an epidemic of lawlessness."[252] Thus the widespread assumption that crime was rampant and society was in decline were the products of both manufactured and accurate perspectives.

Such potent fears raised the question of what had gone astray in France, and experts flocked to offer theories. In the 1870s and 1880s, degeneration theory "elaborated into a complex nosological system in the clinic and disseminated as the very currency of social and political debate,"[253] yet, as early as 1857, some fledgling theories were put forth regarding the mechanisms behind social, psychological, and biological decline. Most notable among these was Bénédict Augustin Morel's *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*[254]--a tract which presented an "anthropologico-psychiatric view of European civilization."[255] In the treatise, Morel juxtaposed healthy biological change in humans with unhealthy change—both as a result of environmental forces—and claimed that while in both cases, the mechanics of heredity passed these changes on to offspring, in the latter case, the risk of and threat posed by abnormality or pathology grew in each subsequent generation. Morel's theory also proved influential as he argued that both the causes and results of degeneration were

[251] Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 98.
[252] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy*, loc. 402-418. Kindle.
[253] Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 99.
[254] B.A. Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (Paris: Libraire de l'Académie Impériale de Médecine, 1857).
[255] Ian Dowbiggin, "Degeneration and Hereditarianism in French Mental Medicine 1840-1890: Psychiatric Theory as Ideological Adaptation," in *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd (London: Tavistock Publications, 2003), 188-232, 191-192.

varied: "just as the causes of degeneration might be physical, moral, or intellectual, so might the results be physical deformities, criminality, insanity—or all at once."[256] Degeneration, had multiple social causes and could manifest in many ways—a fact that made degeneration another vague category to study, just as hysteria had been during the time of Lafarge's trial.

During the 1880s and 1890s, an amalgam of legal minds as well as doctors, psychiatrists, and criminologists became interested in degeneration theory as an explanatory model for the hereditarian roots of social ills.[257] Such cooperative—and at times conflictual—work[258] between experts produced an entire cadre of ideas that placed labels on people based on the individual's place on a spectrum between normality and abnormality:

> In both France and Italy, people out of the ordinary got labeled with their problem: 'born criminal,' 'neurasthenic,' 'epileptic,' 'vagabond,' 'invert,' 'idiot,' 'genius,' 'melancholic.' The adjectives real, professional, born, or innate distinguished them from their accidental or occasional equivalents. For the category as a whole, contemporaries used abnormal and degenerate and more rarely monster, meaning unnatural. Terms like 'unbalanced,' 'ill-adjusted,' and 'primitive,' referred to the root problem, while 'dangerous,' and 'anti-,' 'extra-,' and 'a-social' described how difference manifested itself.[259]

In the press coverage of the Steinheil trial, we will see this process of labelling at work, as well as allusions toward the theory of degeneration which scaffolded perspectives on crime, and particularly women's crime during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, degeneration was thought by many experts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to be a main causal factor in the prevalence of crime.

[256] Nicole Rafter, Chad Posick, and Michael Rocque, *The Criminal Brain: Understanding Biological Theories of Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 107.
[257] Ashley notes that during the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was much transference of knowledge and theories between psychiatry, criminology, and neurology as these specializations converged on a hereditarian theory of crime and psychopathology. To be sure, there were disagreements, but basic premises were shared between experts.
Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy*, chapter 1.
[258] Later in the chapter, I will discuss the rift between the French and Italian schools of criminology.
[259] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy*, loc. 584. Kindle.

3.3 Constructing Paris's 'Red Widow'

The woman who would become known as the 'Red Widow' was born Jeanne Marguerite Japy on April 16, 1869 in Beaucourt.[260] Her parents, Edouard and Emilie Japy were solidly bourgeois, and Marguerite enjoyed the company of two sisters and a brother. As she grew older however, her father fell to alcoholism and the family's wealth slowly waned. By the time Marguerite was nineteen she fell in love with Lieutenant Robert Scheffer—a man with no money and no social standing. To her parents, who had also married young against their parents' wishes, this match would not do. The stress of the situation may have contributed to Edouard Japy's fatal heart attack not long after.

Emilie Japy had a problem on her hands; rumors spread that Marguerite had enjoyed other alliances aside from her dalliance with the lieutenant, and there was even talk that she had a son out of wedlock. It was then that Madame Japy's resolve softened toward the artist, Adolphe Steinheil—a man who was clearly infatuated with the beautiful, young Marguerite. He was decades her senior and somewhat shy, but had an "excellent artistic reputation—derived largely from an association with his father, Louis Steinheil, who had restored the windows of the cathedral at Chartres and of the Sainte Chapelle…"[261] While he was not wealthy, he was stable, and by marrying Marguerite and Adolphe, Madame Japy ensured that her daughter's prospects would be no further dimmed by rumor. The couple married in the summer of 1890 and settled down in Paris at Steinheil's home—the Impasse Ronsin.

[260] I have used several sources to reconstruct the pre-trial life of Marguerite Steinheil (née Japy). See Benjamin F. Martin, "The Steinheil Affair: Sex, Sin, and Murder," *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Epoque* 15-78, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Laura James, "Marguerite Steinheil" *The Beauty Defense: Femmes Fatales on Trial*, loc. 2043-2114 (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2020); Ernest Dudley, *The Scarlett Widow* (London: Lume Books, 2018); Marguerite Steinheil, *My Memoirs* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1912).
[261] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 17.

Immediately, there were issues in the marriage. Despite the fact that the Steinheils welcomed their only child, a daughter, Marthe almost right away, all was not well. By her own admission and despite the fact that she was fostering connections in the Parisien art scene, Marguerite quickly grew tired of her husband's 'timidity' and lack of ambition, and became bored by her life at the Impasse Ronsin.[262] Shortly after the birth of their daughter, Marguerite began a series of affairs with powerful and well-connected men. The first of these was Manuel Baudouin, a state prosecutor. At the same time, the Steinheils began running a *salon* out of the large rooms of the Impasse Ronsin. The *salon* was attended by many Parisian notables; at one point or another, Emile Zola, François Sadi-Carnot, as well as various other dignitaries including the Prince of Wales paid the Steinheils a visit.[263] Fascinatingly, M. Trouard-Riolle, the very man who would later prosecute Marguerite's case visited the *salon* on one occasion. Whether or not this anecdote is factual, Marguerite thought to mention the brief meeting, and as would be expected, she was not terribly impressed with the man. In her memoirs, which were published years after her trial, she claimed that he was a boring '*poseur*', and an "ambitious and scheming man" who believed himself to be irresistible to women.[264]

Running the salon helped Marguerite achieve a couple aims. First, she claims that she needed the intellectual stimulation provided by proximity to the Parisian intelligentsia. Feeling stifled in her marriage, the salon provided an outlet for her to engage in high culture.[265] Second, Marguerite was able to make connections with elite men who she could then pursue romantically. Counted among these men was Félix Faure, the then president of the Republic.

[262] Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, 20.
[263] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 20.
[264] Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, 22.
[265] Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, 23.

While Madame Steinheil certainly "delighted in pretending to be a republican pompadour"[266] she also took advantage of these liaisons to pursue a third aim—strangely—to help her husband sell his paintings. During her affair with Faure, for instance, the president charged Adolphe with the task of producing the massive painting, the *Remise des decorations par le Président de la République aux survivants de la Redoute Ruinée (8 août 1897)* for which he was paid a large sum of money and given the title of knight in the Legion of Honor.[267] While Marguerite entertained these relationships, she fabricated a series of lies about a generous Aunt Lily whose house Marguerite would frequent, and who bestowed up on Marguerite lavish gifts, in order to cover up her illicit behavior.[268] It is clear however that from very early on, Adolphe was aware of Marguerite's dalliances, yet he seemed to truly love Marguerite and their daughter, and thus divorce remained out of the question for the couple.

It is important to note that not all Madame Steinheil's affairs were quietly executed. During her affair with Faure, Marguerite would visit the Elysée Palace often, sneaking in and out of the gardens. She claimed that these rendez-vous were in the capacity of providing counsel to the president, and specifically, Marguerite was to aid the president in the writing of his own memoirs.[269] This ruse did not seem to fool many people as even Marguerite allowed for the fact that as her relationship with Faure continued, her *salon* had never seen higher attendance. All sorts came to pass along their requests to the president's mistress—a role that Marguerite seemed to relish. Ultimately, the relationship with Faure caused a scandal after he was found dead of a stroke and heart failure after relations with Marguerite in February 1899. She was found in a highly compromising position and needed to be secreted off the property by servants. Over the

[266] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 19.
[267] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 19.
[268] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 18.
[269] Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, 44.

subsequent weeks, the press ran with the story and made insinuations regarding Marguerite's role in the death and theorized that on her way out, Marguerite had managed to steal important state papers. Eventually, the sensationalism of the story ran its course and Marguerite continued her lifestyle of seducing powerful men, holding her *salon*, and selling her husband's paintings to her powerful paramours.

Subsequent to Faure's death, Marguerite carried on affairs with other men. These included the director of the Forges de Vulcain, Emile Chouanard, who bought a villa called Bellevue for he and Marguerite to stay at when they were together. When their long-term affair ended, Marguerite retained the villa and used it for her own purposes, including welcoming guests and hosting her husband and daughter. The last affair that she engaged in before the murders occurred was with Maurice Borderel. By this time, Marguerite was thirty-eight, and was seemingly looking for a replacement for Chouanard with whom she had been for many years. Borderel was a fifty-year-old widower with three children who also happened to be a wealthy landowner. While Marguerite claimed that the relationship was of no real consequence,[270] the press and prosecutors would disagree, arguing that the motive for the murder of Marguerite's mother and husband could be found in the relationship between she and Borderel. In order to marry Borderel—who would not marry a divorced woman—Marguerite would kill Adolphe, or so the trial would assert.[271] Marguerite's life would come under intense scrutiny in the trial—her upbringing and relationship with her parents, her affairs, her marriage, and her lies—all of which I have discussed in brief throughout this section. In the next part, I will delve into the press

[270] Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, 75.
[271] Sarah Horowitz, "Scandalous Friendships: The Dangers of Intimacy in the Steinheil Affair of 1908-1909," 247-264 *Romantic Review* 110, no. 1-4 (2019) 256.

coverage of the Steinheil trial and will demonstrate the ways that her past and even her upbringing were used as ammunition against her.

3.4 Le Crime: "Cherchez la Femme"[272]

Early in the morning of May 31, 1908, Marguerite was discovered yelling for help, tied to her bed. Her mother, who had spent the night and husband were dead, seemingly having been strangled. The entire family was found by the Steinheils' valet, Rémy Couillard.[273] Law enforcement, including Octave Hammard, the head of the Sûreté[274], and Magistrate Joseph Leydet, streamed into the Steinheil home to investigate the incident. At first, Marguerite claimed that she had been startled awake around midnight by a strange noise. She awoke in time to see three men clothed in long, black robes and a woman with red hair enter her room and proceed to threaten her, asking her where the Steinheils kept their money.[275] The next day, when Marguerite was questioned, her story changed in some places and in others, was exaggerated.[276] When she was shown a photograph of a potential suspect, Marguerite claimed that this was the man who had participated in the murders. This man had an alibi however and was let go.

As this accusation proved to be a dead end, Marguerite began searching for other suspects. The first was Rémy Couillard—the valet that had stumbled on the crime scene. He too proved innocent when evidence tying Couillard to the case fell apart. Marguerite had claimed

[272] Meaning "where is the woman?"—a quote by Alexandre Dumas in *Les Mohicans de Paris*, alluding to the fact that where there is crime, there is often a woman. As cited in Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris: A True Story of Murder, Theft, and Detection* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 268.
[273] Hoobler and Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris*, 272.
[274] The Sûreté is the criminal investigation bureau associated with the Parisien police.
[275] Hoobler and Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris*, 273.
[276] Hoobler and Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris*, 274.

that some jewelry had been stolen, including a ring.[277] One of the diamonds was found by police in Couillard's room, which seemed to cement his involvement, yet days later, a jeweler came forward and told police that Marguerite, herself had had this ring taken apart on 12 June. Thus, Couillard was exonerated. The third suspect to whom Marguerite pointed the finger was Alexander Wolff, the son of her maid, Mariette. When Marguerite was brought in for more questioning, her accusation against Wolff likewise fell apart. It was then that Marguerite was placed under arrest. Leydet[278] served her a warrant and stated that, "by your lies and your concealment of evidence, you have misled justice and placed obstacles in the way of the seizures of the murderers."[279] Madame Steinheil was then taken to the Saint Lazare Prison to await trial.[280]

[277] Hoobler and Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris*, 276.
[278] Note: between the arrest and trial, Louis André replaced Leydet as magistrate.
[279] Martin, "The Steinheil Affair," 35.
[280] She waited for almost a year for trial in the Saint Lazare prison.

Fig. 5, "L'Affaire Steinheil: Les Deux Veuves," L'œil de la Police, January 1, 1908. Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9555936.r=veuve veuve?rk=1244641;2

In the first chapter, I examined press coverage of the Lafarge case in order to explore gendered social anxieties that existed contemporaneously with the trial. I found that intense fears about romantic literature triggering nervous conditions in women were widespread among experts, press, and social commentators. Also of concern was the idea that women who were exposed to such harmful novels, were thought to be more likely to behave in ways that were dangerous to the preservation of bourgeois cultural values. Specifically, it was feared that women carried within them the potential for destruction, yet it was nearly impossible to tell

which women were plotting to commit acts of violence—a burgeoning notion that gave rise to a moral panic of sorts around women's illegibility. Finally, I found that while Lafarge was not considered hysterical until much later, the way she was portrayed by the press reflected understandings about hysteria that existed contemporarily to the case, showing that these ideas did exist in French culture and psychiatry prior to the creation of Charcot's typology, but did not yet have the power to unite discourse around an explicit diagnosis of hysteria.

The goal of my second chapter was to demonstrate the influence of Charcot's category and to highlight the increasing power of psychiatry throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century. While Lafarge had not been diagnosed hysterical at the time of her trial—a fact that some scholars seem to take for granted—by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, she is associated with hysteria. I argued that this retrospective diagnosis can be explained as the result of a psychiatric discipline that had come of age in prestige and specialization since the time of Lafarge's trial, and perhaps more importantly, Lafarge's retrospective diagnosis can be understood as the effect of Charcot's public interventions in the field. In the 1860s, Charcot had created a new nosological understanding of hysteria through his clinical work at the Salpêtrière, and had opened his work to the public in the guise of sensationalist displays of women with hysteria. Both of these developments created the possibility for French laymen and experts alike to think about women in terms of psychopathology, thus, retrospective understandings of Lafarge were appropriated by psychiatric expertise.

To my reading, press coverage of the 1909 trial of Madame Steinheil can be likewise understood as an echo of contemporary French anxieties and theories on the intersection between criminality, women, and society. For the remainder of this section then, I will be presenting press coverage of the trial in order to explore the ways in which this case and the accused reflected

gendered attitudes and social anxieties about women which were contemporary to the case. Furthermore, by delving into specific pieces of trial coverage, I would argue that we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the ways that this trial dovetailed with ever more intricate theories on criminality and French society. In particular, I contend, that underlying this case is the theory of degeneration (*dégénérescence*).

The trial of Madame Steinheil took place in early November of 1909 at the Cour d'Assises of the Seine, and just like the Lafarge case of 1840, this case resonated with the public. Newspapers covering the trial speak about the multitudes of onlookers hopeful to get a seat in the courtroom, including notables like Marcel Proust, and Count Robert de Montesquieu who at one point claimed that the case proved that "parvenus do not know how to kill."[281] By the time of the trial, Steinheil's background was no mystery to the public. Upon her arrest a year earlier, newspapers "were filled with stories about her misdeeds, including her many affairs and her habit of selling secrets and blackmailing officials whenever she needed money. These accounts made her into one of the great types of nineteenth-century literature: the provincial who comes to the capital and dreams of making it into the elite."[282] Many in Paris were fascinated to see if this woman lived up to their expectations—whether Marguerite embodied an infamous murderer and high-class courtesan.

Press coverage of the trial[283] has much to tell us about public attitudes toward criminal women that provided the foundations for interpreting this crime according to contemporary

[281] Martin, The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque," 44.
[282] Horowitz, "Scandalous Friendships," 250.
[283] I will not be detailing the trial proceedings as the purpose of this chapter is to establish the link between coverage of the trial and discourses on degeneration. If the details of the trial are of interest, refer to Martin's article, "The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque." Such detailed summaries are simply beyond the scope of this study.

frameworks. By way of introductory comments about the accused for an article in *L'Action Française*, the journalist Abel Manouvriez claimed that, "the personality of the 'Red Widow' can be singularly ascertained by examining her face. One wanted to see in her only the vulgar heroine of a 'villainous crime' that of the bourgeois courtesan suggesting clandestine prostitution to maintain her luxury and her way of life."[284] The fact that Manouvriez was expecting to be able to read criminality on the face of Steinheil is telling. In 1876, Cesare Lombroso published *Criminal Man*—his important if somewhat incendiary work on criminal men—and followed this edition by publishing a longer version from his study of Italian prisons. Through the course of his research, Lombroso made the argument that "he could distinguish between the criminal and 'normal' [man] on the basis of certain gross morphological characteristics."[285] In 1893, Lombroso followed his research on criminal men by publishing *Criminal Woman*—a study that distinguished between women who Lombroso considered 'normal,' 'criminal,' or 'prostitutes.' Again, Lombroso claimed that he was able to discern these differences based on phenotypical characteristics. In men, 'degenerative characteristics' may include "jug ears, enlarged frontal sinuses, severe cranial anomalies, and facial asymmetry," and the presence of any or all of these traits may indicate a degenerative predisposition.[286] Women, Lombroso claims have none of these indicators. Rather, one may discern a woman prone to degeneracy by the presence of an 'exaggerated' amount of dark hair, crow's feet, large calves, and excess weight: "prostitutes' greater weight is confirmed by the notorious obesity of those who grow old in their unfortunate

[284] "La personnalité de la "Veuve Rouge" se dessine singulièrement à l'examen de sa physionomie. On a voulu ne voir en elle que l'héroine vulgaire d'un "crime crapuleux" que la courtisane bourgeoise demandant à la prostitution clandestine l'entretien de son luxe et de son train de vie."
Abel Manouvriez, "Mme Steinheil devant la cour d'assises," *L'Action Française*, November 4, 1909, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[285] Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 99.

[286] Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman,* Translated by Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 79.

trade and gradually become positive monsters of fatty tissues."[287] Such words are reminiscent of Manouvriez's expectation that Steinheil would look every bit the 'vulgar heroine' that he expected to see. Thus, in Lombroso's framing, discerning the difference between women who are 'mad' and those who are 'bad' and pose a risk to society can be as simple as correctly reading their faces—proof of degeneracy or normalcy lying within.

In a 1914 edition of the *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, Lombroso's reading of the Steinheil case was referenced. It states that,

> …Lombroso sees in Madame Steinheil a hereditary degenerate and hysterical, born criminal, belonging to the rather rare type which he described with Ferrero. Mrs. Steinheil, according to the learned professor of Turin, would be the daughter of an immoral mother and a father given over to excess; she would be suffering from mental degeneration, and one would notice the exaggerated prominence of her cheekbones and her jaw…she presented, moreover, fits of hystero-epilepsy[288] and ate, it seems, at a formative age, worms and earth. What is certain and what is certainly pathological are her absurd lies against Wolf and Couillard…[289]

To make the argument that Steinheil was guilty, Lombroso mentioned a number of factors that supported his claim. First, Lombroso pointed out that Marguerite's mother was prone to immorality and her father to excessive emotionality. Recall that her parents married against the wishes of their parents, and that her father died after Marguerite had an illicit affair with a man her parents considered unfit for her; the belief was that Steinheil's father died of a heart attack brought about by his intense anger at the situation. Next, Lombroso argued that evidence of

[287] Lombroso and Ferrero, *Criminal Woman*, chapter 14.

[288] For clinicians, the difference between Charcot's 'grand hysteria' and epilepsy was difficult to delineate. It was believed that a hysterical fit looked much like epilepsy, but in the case of the former malady, pressure on the ovaries could stop the seizure. In epilepsy, moreover, mental sharpness would worsen over time—a symptom that was not present in hysteria. For more on these two illnesses see: Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy*, chapter 4 on "Neurotics."

[289] "…Lombroso voit dans Mme Steinheil une héréditaire dégénérée et hystérique, criminelle née, appartenant au type assez rare qu'il a décrit avec Ferrero. Mme Steinheil, d'après le savant professeur de Turin, serait la fille d'une mère immorale et d'un père livré à tous les excès, elle serait atteinte de dégénérescence mentale et on remarquerait la saillie exagérée de ses pommettes et de ses mâchoires…Elle présentait, en outre, des accès hystéro-èpileptiques et mangeait, paraît-il, à l'âge de la formation, des vers et de la terre. Ce qu'il y a de certain et ce qui est certainement pathologique, ce sont ses mensonges absurdes contre Wolf et contre Couillard…"
Cesare Lombroso, "Réflexions sur le procès Steinheil," *Annales Médico-Psychologiques* 5 (1914) : 469-470. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Steinheil's degeneracy—which she received from her overly emotional and immoral parents—could be discerned by her cheekbones and jaw. This piece of evidence, as we will show, is the most dubious as the French school was suspicious of the Lombrosian scheme of physiological degeneracy. Finally, Lombroso claimed that Steinheil was a known hysteric who suffered from fits, spread 'absurd' lies, and behaved strangely—as evidenced by eating earthworms when she was young. This claim carries holds up under scrutiny as we have shown, French psychiatry was invested in the narrative of threatening, hysterical women.

While I would argue that it is important to mention the physiological dimension of degeneracy as these ideas do appear in French interpretations, it is also critical to discuss the suspicion with which French medico-legalists and psychiatrists regarded Lombroso's framework. As Robert A. Nye discusses in *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*[290], there existed a rift between French and Italian criminologists in the late nineteenth-century. During the First International Congress of Criminal Anthropology in Rome, most blatantly put the difference between the schools. Italian criminologists maintained theoretical unity by rallying around Lombroso's ideas: "the preponderant role of hereditary factors in criminal behavior, the existence of identifiable and morphological characteristics in criminals, and the conviction that various pathological influences—atavism, epilepsy, moral imbecility—controlled the appearance of 'criminal' physiological manifestations."[291] While French theorists would not disagree with the hereditarian element of criminal behavior, experts like the doctor of legal medicine, Alexandre Lacassagne argued that relying on morphological characteristics or an accompanying stadial theory of time to pinpoint criminals was absurd. One

[290] In particular, see chapter 4, "Heredity or Milieu: The Born-Criminal Debate and the Foundations of Criminology." Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[291] Nye, Crime, *Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, 100.

should instead, he argued, look to the milieu or environment of the criminal; "'les sociétés ont les criminels qu'elles méritent'," he claimed.[292] Further, Lacassagne questioned the use of certain terms, like 'atavism and Darwinism' and also expressed concern that under a Lombrosian scheme, people who exhibited traits associated with criminality would be relegated by jurists to prisons or asylums.[293] At another conference, the Paris congress of 1889, the anthropologist of the Parisian École d'anthropologie, Léonce Manouvrier "compared Lombroso's theories to the disgraced phrenology of Franz Joseph Gall, accused Lombroso's criminal type of being a sort of 'ideal harlequin,' and subjected the Italian efforts at statistical analysis to a rigorous examination."[294] French criminologists had not always been so suspicious of morphological stigma associated with crime, but by the fin-de-siècle, they were highly critical of a 'science' that did not seem to rest on statistical data, and which was fatalist in its outlook. Far more rigorous was the idea that society created criminals—a epistemology that was largely more applicable to a more universalist juridical sphere as well.

While these battles were afoot between international experts, it is crucial to consider whether these nuances reached the public. Returning to Manouvriez's article which stated his expectation to see written on Steinheil's face a 'vulgar' criminality, one wonders to what extent the public was invested in a particular understanding of degeneration that was more akin to Lombroso's epistemology. It is clear that the public broadly engaged with the idea of degeneration. As Nye shows, literate French people were immersed in a conceptual language that was both scientific but accessible. Specifically, the public was engaging with ideas about society and culture that were rooted in degeneration theory: this

[292] Nye, Crime, *Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, 104.
[293] Nye, Crime, *Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, 103.
[294] Nye, Crime, *Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, 106.

> [matrix of scientific concepts] became so profoundly imbued with a common cultural meaning for most literate Frenchmen and women in the *belle époque* that they seem to have gained a practically ideological stature in the era. Degeneration theory in particular served to provide a continuum between biological and social thought that makes nonsense of the usual efforts to distinguish between them, and was so culturally useful that it could explain persuasively all the pathologies from which the nation suffered.[295]

For the French public—many of whom were exposed to the idea that crime was everywhere as a result of newspaper's constant sensationalist attention to criminal activity—degeneration theory neatly explained society's problems. Being able to recognize a degenerate criminal must have seemed attractive. Thus, while experts generally rejected Lombroso's emphasis on morphological stigmata associated with 'born' criminals, the public was almost certainly exposed to these ideas, which may have fit the public's perceptions of criminal behavior and the criminal nicely.

French criminologists would not have generally agreed[296] that certain morphological characteristics should be understood as the primary marker for a predisposition to criminality, yet they may have had an easier time concurring with Lombroso's other points about Steinheil. First, Lombroso claimed that Steinheil's parents were excessive and immoral, thus hers was a clear case of degeneracy. In an article published by *Le Petit Parisien*, one of Steinheil's relatives spoke about the environment in which Steinheil spent her formative years. He claimed that while Steinheil's mother loved her husband, their fights would sometimes escalate into physical conflicts, usually began by Madame Japy—a woman who was a bit 'masculine'—and as a result

[295] Nye, Crime, *Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, 119.

[296] With this said, it is important to note that in 1908, Émile Laurent, a prison and asylum doctor conducted a study on the link between degeneracy and crime, *Le criminal aux points de vue anthropologie, psychologique et social*, and he noted that the morphological characteristics of prisoners did display physiological irregularities more often than did 'normal' people. Interestingly, his study was prefaced by Lacassagne—a criminologist who, as discussed above was critical of Lombroso's theories. Émile Laurent, *Le criminal aux points de vue anthropologie, psychologique et social* (Paris: Vigot Frères, 1908), 158.

of these conflicts, Steinheil's father turned to drink.[297] Her father was, another article claimed, a well-known alcoholic in Beaucourt.[298] For French theorists, these facts may point to a dysfunctional environment that could impact children, both through milieu and heredity.

It is interesting that these details are considered in Steinheil's trial. The behavior of her parents and the manner of her upbringing seems irrelevant to the question of her guilt, and yet, such points were specifically remarked upon in newspapers. I would argue that including these details only make sense if one considers the context of this case. If one remains attendant to the basic tenants of degeneration theory, Steinheil's childhood has much to say about her predisposition toward crime. According to the French understanding, as I have already pointed to, environment can create criminality, and when one reads these accounts, it becomes clear that the goal of the first part of the trial was to "paint her as wild, impetuous, and a liar from childhood."[299] Moreover, due to the mechanisms of heredity, which underlie degeneration theory, an alcoholic father and a violent mother, it was theorized, could absolutely produce a child that was prone to crime: "according to some scientists, the specific disorder often passed to the next generation in a different but allied form, so that alcoholism in the father appeared as genius or criminality in the child."[300] According to Esquirol 'circle member,' Moreau de Tours,

> the hereditary nature of the nervous diseases (of which hysteria was one) helped to explain their baffling 'protean' quality. Since the nervous propensity 'belongs…to the entire genealogical tree,' the individual family member possessed the biological potential for a broad array of

[297] "Mme Edouard Japy adorait son mari. Cela ne l'empêchait pas d'avoir, avec lui, de temps à autre, des scènes violentes qui, parfois, dégénéraient en pugilats. Ah ! c'est que la mère Edouard était une luronne, sachant comme pas une faire le coup de poing. Son mari en fut bientôt convaincu, et, ne pouvant dominer son épouse, chercha des consolations dans la boisson."
"Le Passé de Madame Steinheil," *Le Petit Parisien*, November 28, 1908, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[298] "Les renseignements recueillis sur son compte sont défavorables. Dans le pays de Beaucourt, il passait pour alcoolique."
"L'Affaire Steinheil," *Le Petit Journal*, November 12, 1909, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[299] Martin, The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque," 46.
[300] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy,* loc.322. Kindle.

> different symptomatic expressions of that propensity and could pass swiftly and easily from one to another.[301]

Therefore, when Steinheil's childhood were mentioned in relation to the crime for which she was later arrested and tried, I would argue that the court and press were perhaps thinking in terms of degeneration, in order to put Steinheil's actions in context.

Hysteria was another factor which Lombroso claims provides evidence for Steinheil's criminality, and as I have shown in the first couple chapters of this piece, hysteria was one of the central ways that 'abnormal' or 'pathological' women were interpreted, especially in the late nineteenth century. Just like Lafarge, Steinheil was thought to have a strange and excessive affect. When she was young, articles noted, she once ate earthworms as a result of her 'hysterical state,' or so her doctor, a Dr. L claimed.[302] This fact was apparently well known about Madame Steinheil as one of her relatives told the press that, "Madame Steineheil is sick, neurotic, hysterical."[303] In her interrogation, it was brought up that Steinheil's teachers too remarked on her odd behavior: when she was five years old, she was already 'seductive'—an overly 'captivating' child—an 'actress', and a liar, or so they claimed.[304] According to Morel, the category he termed '*folie hystérique'* "manifested itself in exaggerated nervousness and peculiarities."[305] One of his patients to whom he applied this label "cried and laughed for no

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[301] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 328.

[302] " Un jour elle la surprit la bouche pleine de vers de terre!...C'était là une habitude qu'elle avait prise et que le docteur L…, appelé, attribua à son état hystérique."
"Le Passé de Madame Steinheil," *Le Petit Parisien*.

[303] "Mme Steineheil est un malade, une névrosée, une hystérique."
"Le Passé de Madame Steinheil," *Le Petit Parisien*.

[304] "Vous aviez alors cinq ans, et si tout le monde s'accorde à vous trouver déjà pleine de séduction et d'attrait, tout le monde vous représente déjà comme comédienne et menteuse. Une de vos professeurs, Mlle Rienger, vous dépeint comme une élève excessivement captivante et caressante, mais aussi comme une menteuse."
Manouvriez, "Mme Steinheil devant la cour d'assises."

[305] Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 227.

reason and yielded early on to all kinds of bizarreries and eccentricities'."[306] Steinheil's behavior, as reported by her relatives absolutely fits Morel's theories on hysteria—a label that now held meaning for French society in a way that it did not during Lafarge's time, thus this trial can be approached through this lens from the beginning.

As touched on in the context, Steinheil's numerous and strange lies about the night of the murders caused the police to become suspicious of the grieving widow. Recall that in turn, Steinheil claimed that three men in robes and a woman with red hair had broken in at midnight, that her valet, and the son of her maid had committed the murders. In the press, not only were these sensational falsehoods catalogued, but journalists dug deeper into Steinheil's childhood to find evidence of oddness there too. Steinheil's childhood teacher was one of those interviewed. When asked what Marguerite was like as a child, her teacher claimed that she was smart, but a liar and a 'talented actress' so she was often forgiven for her lies.[307] This detail was also brought up in the interrogation portion of the trial. To Madame Steinheil, the charge was levied:

> As far as you are concerned, a most thorough investigation has been made. We went back in your life to 1873. You were then five years old, and everyone agrees that one would find you already full of seduction and attraction, everyone already represents you as an actress and a liar. One of your teachers, Miss Rienger, portrays you as an overly captivating and affectionate student, but also as a liar.[308]

It is compelling that the press and court chose to invest in this narrative around Steinheil's habit of lying. As it happens, lying was also pathologized by the late nineteenth century. The physician, Charles Lasègue claimed in 1881 that one of the main traits "of [hysteria] was a

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[306] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria,* 227.

[307] "La demoiselle Reltini dit qu'elle était intelligente, enjouée et câline. Le professeur de dessin dit qu'elle était futile et menteuse. Et elle ajoute qu'elle avait un talent de comédienne pour se faire pardonner ses mensonges." "L'Affaire Steinheil." *Le Petit Journal.*

[308] "En ce qui vous concerne, une enquête des plus minutieuses a été faite. On est remonté dans vôtre vie jusqu'en 1873. Vous aviez alors cinq ans, et si tout le monde s'accorde à vous trouver déjà pleine de séduction et d'attrait, tout le monde vous représente déjà comme comédienne et menteuse. Une de vos professeurs, Mlle Rienger, vous dépeint comme une élève excessivement captivante et caressante, mais aussi comme une menteuse." Manouvriez, "Mme Steinheil devant la cour d'assises."

pathological tendency to lying."[309] This theory was furthered by neurologist Henri Huchard who dedicated an entire piece in the *Archives de neurologie* to explore 'duplicity, lying, and simulation.'[310] In it he proclaimed that, "'[hysterics]…deceive their husbands and their parents as well as their doctors'."[311] Not only does this proclamation point to social anxieties about lying women, but it also establishes the link between pathological lying and hysteria.

It is clear that hysteria played a role in narratives about Steinheil, but for our purposes, it is important to be attendant to the idea of hysteria as it corresponded to degeneration theory. Hysteria was, by this point, already considered a disease of the nerves alongside epilepsy and feeblemindedness, and in the late nineteenth century, was considered to be one of the manifestations of degeneracy and a cause of crime. Charles Féré, a member of the Société Médico-psychologique theorized that, hysteria and epilepsy were "the two neuroses with the closes similarities to the hereditary forms of insanity." Hysteria, in the context of degeneration theory, placed emphasis on the hereditary nature of the disorder as well as the behavioral manifestation. After conducting a study on prisoners, Émile Laurent, an asylum and prison doctor, concluded that criminals often suffered the effects of degeneration, and as such, they suffered from hysteria and epilepsy at higher rates than 'normative' patients.[312] Hysteria, seen through the perspective of degeneracy was thought to be found in family history and thus passed through the mechanisms of heredity in a sort of degenerative family tree.[313]

> The 'radically different' type of neurasthenia resulted directly from heredity. Influenced by Charcot, French doctors tended to insist on the organic or the hereditary forms. They took root in a congenitally unhealthy nervous system whose neuropathic elements appeared early or remained latent until exacerbated by circumstances. A number of doctors argued that neurasthenia belonged

[309] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria,* 231.
[310] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria,* 231.
[311] Micale, *Approaching Hysteria,* 231.
[312] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy,* loc.3997. Kindle.
[313] Rafter et al., *The Criminal Brain*, 107.

> to the group of degenerative diseases, keeping company with epilepsy, hysteria, hypochondria, insanity, and idiocy.[314]

This understanding of the hereditary nature of hysteria lends some credence to the court's brief exploration of Steinheil's upbringing and to her parents' behavior. Recall, that her mother was said to be excessively emotional—a trait that Steinheil perhaps inherited. Thus, the underlying argument being made about Steinheil and her family was one of heritable degeneration; Steinheil was hysterical because her parents suffered the effects of degeneracy—a condition that was potentially passed on to Marguerite.

Another factor of degeneration theory that is important to discuss is the link between modernity and decline. In the early days of the nineteenth century, France had begun the process of industrialization, which produced mass migrations from the rural parts of the country into the city. Such mass movements alongside the disruption experienced in patterns of work contributed to the sense of unease.[315] As already discussed, this transformation was accompanied as well by almost cyclical changes in politics, a constant level of poverty, and shifts in cultural values. Max Nordau, the Hungarian-born social critic, highlighted the link between degeneration and modernity by stating that while this notion of degeneracy and disorders like hysteria had always existed, modernization and urbanization had created an environment that allowed them to flourish and to threaten the whole of a society: "we stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria, and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: 'What is to come next'?"[316] Nordau argued that the nature of modern inventions and culture exhausted the human's nervous system, and as a result, hysteria and other degenerative diseases found purchase. This argument was not straightforward however, as some

[314] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy,* loc. 2373, Kindle.
[315] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy,* loc. 451, Kindle.
[316] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1893), 537.

experts argued that degeneration could be understood as a process distinct from modernization, whereas others claimed that modernization created the conditions for degeneration: "the shared problematic of degeneration across the period could perhaps be summarized as follows: was degeneration separable from the history of progress (to be coded as 'regression', 'atavism' or 'primitivism'), or did it reveal that the city, progress, civilisation and modernity were paradoxically, the very agents of decline?"[317]

If we apply these same concerns to the Steinheil trial, we see that providing the groundwork for perspectives on this case was the argument that Marguerite was a living effect of what the stresses and ambitions of modern life could do to a person predisposed to neuroses. As Harris highlighted,[318]

> the disease went deeper and also touched the bourgeoisie, as the refinement of civilization required great adaptive energy, forcefulness, and willpower, qualities that the middle classes were not always seen to possess…middle-class women, often reduced to a debilitating idleness, were prone to nervous illness, their disorders a symptom both of the 'advance of civilization' and of the heavy toll imposed by evolutionary development which had refined their psychic constitutions to an exquisite frailty.[319]

It can be said that when she moved to Paris, Madame Steinheil became a highly sought-after social striver; recall that Montesquieu referred to her as a 'parvenu', or 'reacher.' She was betrothed to a man who she described as 'timid', yet it is clear that Marguerite wanted a quality of life that Adolphe was unlikely to give to her without her effort. She was, in the words of one article, "ambitious to the highest degree..." She only married 'the painter' because she saw the union as a way to 'achieve.'[320] In court, the prosecutor, M. Trouard-Riolle gave a character profile of the accused, and claimed that she, herself was tired of her struggles. She was exhausted

[317] Pick, *Faces of Degeneration,* 106.
[318] Harris, *Murders and Madness,* 12-13.
[319] Harris, *Murders and Madness,* 13.
[320] " Ambitieuse au plus haut point, elle n'avait vu, en épousant le peintre, qu'un efficace moyen de 'parvenir'."

by the lifestyle that she had taken upon herself due to her husband's weakness and timidity. She struggled, or so she claimed, for her daughter's quality of life.[321] I have already mentioned that Marguerite, in order to make money, "badgered [her first paramour] and later his successors to her favors, into posing for portraits by her husband, thereby providing a steady source of income." Furthermore, Trouard-Riolle claimed that Marguerite, tired of the exertion, planned to murder her husband in order to keep a lover that could better sustain her quality of life.[322] Marguerite also, as we know, held a weekly *salon* that was well-attended by Parisian notables. She wanted to be part of Parisian high society and worked hard to be accepted. Such ambition, or so it was theorized, could set off a nervous condition. To the early twentieth-century sensibility, the argument can be made that by 'overusing her brain' and by overworking, Marguerite fell victim to a hurried, modern, urban existence that could have made her sick.[323] Therefore, I would argue that here again, we may be able to perceive a small part of degeneration discourse at the root of Steinheil's trial.

3.5 Conclusion

Unlike Lafarge, Marguerite Steinheil was ultimately found not guilty of murdering her husband and mother. It is difficult to say whether this outcome reflected the widely held belief of her innocence, or rather the court merely lacked sufficient evidence to convict. In any case, it has not been my purpose here to adjudicate this case, for there are other scholars to take on that task.

[321] " Ma vie m'écœurait, me dégoutait. J'étais lasse de mentir sans cesse, de me débattre contre une situation embarrassée au point de vue pécuniaire, de lutter contre mon mari, homme peu pratique et faible. C'était la pensée de ma fille qui me donnait du courage. J'étais dégoûtée de me vendre."
"L'Affaire Steinheil." *Le Petit Journal.*
[322] " Elle ne veut plus d'une lutte de tous les jours pour savoir comment elle paiera ce qu'elle achète."
"L'Affaire Steinheil." *Le Petit Journal.*
[323] Ashley, *"Misfits" in Fin-de-Siècle France and Italy,* loc. 497, Kindle.

Rather, this chapter has served as a way to examine the discussion of Steinheil's case in the context of the larger culture and society.

In this case, as opposed to Lafarge's case, we have found that Steinheil was immediately appraised using psychological and criminological language; there exist sources that immediately ask the question, is this woman hysterical, or can we understand her as a degenerate? This case's interpretations can be juxtaposed with the Lafarge case where Lafarge was considered strange, eccentric, imaginative, and overly emotional—all traits that would have been considered hysterical—but we didn't yet have a robust psychiatric profession in a position to diagnose her as such until much later. I argued in this chapter that while psychiatry and criminology were professionalizing, and were more confident in their ability to diagnose and theorize about "abnormality", there was also a crisis in confidence about psychiatrists' ability to actually cure people. Experts established a theory about degeneration that explained what was wrong with French culture and society, but also, because degeneration was thought to be hereditary, the theory allowed psychiatrists to explain why they were having so much trouble curing patients. This theory became a cornerstone of psychiatry's position in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, while Lafarge's pathology was tied to the idea of romantic literature triggering a nervous condition, Steinheil was thought to be suffering from a biological, inherited disorder. Ultimately, both of these discourses, I have found, address social anxieties-about women's legibility and social degradation

To conclude, if I am permitted to speculate, the fact that Steinheil was found innocent is perhaps telling. It has been my contention in this chapter that we should understand Steinheil's case against the backdrop of a society in fear of decline, and hyper vigilant for evidence of said decline. With this in mind, I wonder whether we are better served by understanding her trial as

one on degeneration rather than murder. While such questions were unfortunately outside the scope of this piece, one remains curious.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explore nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French culture and society through the lens of two criminal cases—the murder trials of Marie Lafarge and Marguerite Steinheil. My aim has been to use these cases to reveal gendered social anxieties as they existed in 1840 and 1909, when these two trials took place, and to trace how they developed and changed between the cases. To this end, chapter one explored the way that Lafarge's case was scaffolded by paranoia about the way that romantic literature could trigger women's excessive imaginations, combined with the upsetting idea that women could harbor malicious intentions from the 'seat of domesticity.' The second chapter showed that while Lafarge was not considered hysterical at the time of her trial, despite the fact that she fit understandings of hysteria in 1840, decades later, she was retrospectively diagnosed. This chapter aimed to demonstrate that Lafarge's broadly commented upon eccentric traits were simply appropriated by an emboldened psychiatric profession toward the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, the third chapter discussed the Steinheil case of 1909 against the context of degeneration theory and argued that the trial can be understood as a meditation on anxieties about social decline. In sum, I have argued that the language used to appraise 'aberrant' women changed from concerns over romantic literature and inner fantasy lives to a more static understanding of biological, inheritable degeneration. Both cases should be historicized as these interpretations make sense in context and can be mapped onto the changing sociocultural landscape in France during this time frame.

As in any piece of this length, many avenues had to be abandoned or neglected in pursuit of a more coherent argument. Were I to continue this research, I might use other case studies; specifically, I would be intrigued by inter-war and post-war cases to trace the way that war

informs social anxiety, and discourse. Of particular interest to me would be the way that degeneration theory branches into eugenic or racial thinking. One would imagine that such ideas would pop up in trials held during those fifty years. Again, it is unfortunately the case that such additions were simply outside the scope of this project.

I believe that what this thesis ultimately offers is the idea that social anxieties may change more or less, but the language used to appraise subjects of anxiety evolves. Between Lafarge's and Steinheil's cases, the concepts and jargon used to comment upon their respective 'aberrance' seems incomparable, yet I would argue that ultimately this is a question of 'normative' and 'abnormal'—a socially contingent set of categories. Perhaps social commentators make the argument that imagination and romantic literature create 'aberrant' women, as in the case of Lafarge, or perhaps psychiatric and criminological theories are employed to argue that Steinheil was pathological. In both cases, it is vital to understand that these were socially constructed categories, and begs us to look on these sources with a bit of suspicion. Who decides what 'normal' and 'abnormal' mean? Who do these categories suit? One should never take language used to define normativity for granted, no matter how much professional jargon is used.

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