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The Bartlett Trial Revisited: Delicacy, Judicial Bias, and New Women

Edwin Bartlett, a successful, forty-year-old London grocer, died in bed early on 1 January 1886 with a fatal dose of liquid chloroform in his stomach. An autopsy and inquest led to the arrest of Mrs. Bartlett, who had been with her husband at the time of his death and had procured chloroform a short time before. The ensuing trial offered up a riveting sequence of lurid elements: poison, a love triangle, strange sexual concepts, gruesome medical details, mesmerism, and eleventh-hour revelations. The newspapers followed the affair, variously known as "The Pimlico Mystery" or "The Pimlico Poisoning Case," with increasing interest from early February, when disclosures at the inquest made it clear that this was no ordinary case. The April trial, which lasted six days, "caused much sensation in the world" and, reported a correspondent for the *New York Times*, proved even "more interesting to London" than the current political crisis over home rule for Ireland (Winslow, 4; *New York Times* 19 Apr. 1886: 5). Enthusiasts besieged the court seeking admission. The trial was especially attractive to women, who, according to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, "occupied all the best seats" even though "the details of the case are by no means delicate" (12 April 1886: 4). When Mrs. Bartlett was found not guilty, her supporters within the Old Bailey and the great crowds outside broke into cheers, while a minority of more reflective observers wondered how she had carried out the crime in such a way as to escape punishment.

In 1927 Sir John Hall wrote: "Strange stories have been unfolded at the Old Bailey, but no stranger one has been heard than that of Mrs. Bartlett" ("Preface," *Trial*). Hall's observation remains valid, even though today the trial of Adelaide Bartlett is little remembered.¹ Along with its novelty value,

the case is a cornucopia of information about Victorian medicine, jurisprudence, sexual manners and mores, journalistic practices, and many other matters brought together by the drama of a murder trial. As Richard Altick observes, the historian "finds in the annals of Victorian murder a wealth of authentic social detail which is extracted with difficulty, if at all, from other sources" (11). Altick, for instance, finds the case interesting in what it reveals about Victorian attitudes toward contraception, while Mary Hartman shows that it offers insight into, among other things, changing views of female adultery (Altick 247-49; Hartman 174, 213). Yseult Bridges, whose 1970 book on the Pimlico affair, *Poison and Adelaide Bartlett*, remains the most detailed study of the subject, explores social detail in her extensive attempt to prove Adelaide's guilt and answer the crucial question of how the chloroform was ingested.

This essay will focus on another issue with social roots: the confrontation between, on one hand, the Victorian passion for protecting the "delicacy" of respectable women, and, on the other, the growing emancipation of women from traditional assumptions about their essential nature and proper roles. Although Sir Alfred Wills, who presided at the Bartlett trial, was well known for objectivity and clear discernment, his hidebound attitude about a woman's place clouded his thinking during the proceedings and particularly in his summing-up. The judge was provoked by the many women in the audience, whose presence struck him as highly inappropriate. In attending a murder trial, especially one whose details "are by no means delicate," they were violating the Victorian ideology of "separate spheres" for men and women. More importantly, Mr. Justice Wills was moved by the circumstances of the young and attractive Adelaide Bartlett, who, testimony suggested, had been mistreated by males lacking the paternalistic chivalry of true gentlemen. The demure defendant, who seemingly had been brought to the trial through victimization, contrasted with the pushy "unfeminine" women in the audience. Judge Wills's surprisingly lenient attitude towards Mrs. Bartlett, like the overwhelming public interest in the trial, was especially motivated by the Bartletts' strange marital history, which, as it was confusingly reconstructed, made Adelaide Bartlett appear more like a victim than a criminal.

I

The marriage of Edwin and Adelaide Bartlett in 1875 was one of social and economic convenience. Adelaide was the illegitimate daughter of anonymous parents, a Frenchwoman and an Englishman "of good social position" who was never named at the trial (Clarke, "Leaves" 641).² She had received a convent education in France and then been taken to England. There she was lodged in a house where Edwin Bartlett's older brother was a tenant and his younger brother a guest. Through this connection, the agents of her father brought the teenage Adelaide together with Edwin, a solid prospect as a husband. Edwin provided her with a legitimate name, and in return he received a sum of money that he used to establish a chain of groceries. Despite their arranged marriage, the couple appeared affectionate and well matched. Edwin admired his wife's learning, and she apparently found it easy to get along with her good-natured, hardworking, bourgeois husband. Their lives together were mostly self-contained. They shared an enthusiasm for breeding St. Bernards, but they had little mutual outside social life, and Adelaide spent much time alone.

The only known problem in the early years of the marriage derived from the presence of Edwin's father, whom the son had encouraged to live with him and his new wife. Adelaide and Bartlett Senior did not get on well, and eventually the couple, at Adelaide's instigation, moved to quarters too small to accommodate a third party. Earlier, however, in 1879, Adelaide had a violent falling out with her father-in-law because of his accusations against her. He alleged that she had been having an affair with Edwin's younger brother, Frederick, whom Adelaide had known first. Frederick soon afterwards went to America, and Edwin, at his wife's insistence, prevailed upon his father to sign an affidavit admitting that his accusations were false. At the trial, however, the father disavowed the document, said he had signed it only to make peace with his son, and renewed his allegation that Adelaide had run off "for some week or more, and Edwin and me . . . almost knew she had gone with Fred Bartlett" (*Trial* 100).

Another significant event in the lives of the Bartletts, at least in retrospect, also occurred in 1879, when Adelaide visited Mary Grove Nichols. Mrs. Nichols advised women on sexual difficulties and, along with her physician husband, Thomas Low Nichols, advocated non-traditional health regimens and championed unusual sexual and spiritual beliefs. The Nicholsons particularly preached the Victorian gospel of "free love"—the

idea that sex must occur only in conjunction with love and that sexual abstinence is the only appropriate response to a loveless marriage.³ Furthermore, they maintained that the sole legitimate object of sex is procreation. It is unknown what Adelaide Bartlett and Mrs. Nichols had to say to one another, but witnesses testified that the Bartletts had long owned a book by Thomas Nichols entitled *Esoteric Anthropology*, which set out the Nicholsons' beliefs, contained what for the time was candid sexual information, and impressed Adelaide enough that she lent it to a family friend (*Trial* 179-80).⁴ Adelaide's association with the Nicholsons, and especially the presence of *Esoteric Anthropology* in the Bartlett home, would become important factors in her trial.

When in 1881 Mrs. Bartlett became pregnant for the first and last time, she and her husband obtained the services of a midwife and nurse recommended by Mrs. Nichols, one Annie Walker, who delivered Adelaide's stillborn child following a difficult labor. The only solid evidence of marital dissatisfaction on Adelaide's part came from the nurse, who after attending Mrs. Bartlett became one of her few friends. Annie Walker testified at the trial that she had heard Adelaide complain about Edwin's lack of appreciation of her piano playing and needlework and about Edwin's will, which contained the strange provision that Adelaide could receive his considerable property, part of which had come from her, only if she did not remarry (*Trial* 180-81).

In 1886 the Bartletts made a new friend whose appearance was fateful for all involved and probably fatal for Edwin. After meeting the Bartletts earlier in the year at his Wesleyan chapel, the Reverend George Dyson called on them during the summer and got along with them so well that he very quickly became an intimate and prized friend. According to the young minister's testimony, an understanding was struck that required Dyson, who was very well educated by Edwin's standards, to tutor Adelaide in various academic subjects. Dyson frequently visited Adelaide during the day while her husband was at work and occasionally stayed to eat dinner when Edwin returned. Dyson, whom the admiring Bartletts invested with the nickname "Georgius Rex," became such a fixture that slippers and a smoking jacket were kept for his use. How much tutoring took place, however, was open to question. A servant testified that she never noticed Dyson bringing books; she also stated that she had once, following Dyson's visit, found the window curtains pinned together in the room where he and Adelaide had been, and that on another occasion she had unexpectedly entered the room

to discover Adelaide seated on the floor at Dyson's feet, her head resting against his knee (*Trial* 292, 128, 130-32).

Whatever Dyson's relationship with Adelaide was, Edwin was so pleased with their new friend that, when he rewrote his will in early September removing the impediment to his wife's remarriage, he named Dyson as an executor. At the trial a letter that Edwin had sent Dyson was produced; it thanked him "for the very loving letter you sent Adelaide" but did not reveal the exact nature of that communication (*Trial* 135-36). Dyson said his letter was in response to Edwin's desire that the minister win Adelaide to a devout frame of mind and that the three of them remain good friends, and he also claimed that Edwin saw no problems in the minister's relation to his wife, even though Dyson told Bartlett that he was growing too fond of her and that the relationship was interfering with his ministry (*Trial* 157). Edwin still encouraged the connection. Sometime during that fall Dyson gave Adelaide an admiring, sentimental poem of dubious literary merit that referred to her as "My Birdie."

In early December Edwin fell sick of a mysterious ailment that caused internal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, depression, and occasional excitability; it had deprived him of sleep and greatly weakened him. His condition was exacerbated by painful tooth trouble: a dentist of striking incompetence, in preparing him for a plate a decade earlier, had sawed off rather than pulled his teeth, with the result that the stumps had rotted. In response to his worsening condition, Adelaide was compelled on December 10 to find a physician. Her selection was a young stranger, a local practitioner with the vocationally resonant name of Dr. Leach. Leach's diagnosis was mercury poisoning and gastritis. Where mercury could have originated was unclear, although Leach initially thought that it might have been a treatment for syphilis, a conclusion the patient stoutly denied. Edwin improved somewhat under the doctor's care, but because he continued to suffer greatly from depression and acute insomnia, Leach eventually resorted to morphine. He also had the stumps of Edwin's teeth removed by a dentist. Leach was a frequent attendant right up to Edwin's death.

To Leach the Bartletts in most respects had seemed an affectionate and largely normal couple, much as they struck most observers, but his testimony recalled several odd incidents that took on significance after Edwin's death and contributed to the physician's assessment of Edwin as "one of the most extraordinary men I ever had to deal with—though a very pleasant and nice man" (*Trial* 231). For instance, in statements he made to

Leach, Edwin avowed a belief in mesmerism or "vital force," the idea that people emit energies through which they can control others or energize themselves. Such concepts, which were to become important in the trial, may have come to him—possibly via Adelaide—from the work of the Nicholsons, who promulgated similar notions in various works, including *Esoteric Anthropology* (72, 205). He told Leach that one night he had got up and stood for two hours with his hands spread above the head of his sleeping wife: "I felt the vital force being drawn from her to me. I felt it going into me through my finger tips, and after that I laid down and slept" (*Trial* 218).

The doctor reported that on another occasion Edwin had excitedly told him a confused story of being hypnotically possessed by a friend who was somehow influencing him through Adelaide. According to Leach, Bartlett was vague about how he was being affected, saying only that the influence was causing both him and his wife to do strange things. Leach recalled that Adelaide had treated Edwin's story as a delusion and tried to change the topic of conversation, but that he had persisted at length in his unsuccessful attempt to get Edwin to clarify his statements (*Trial* 244-46). Both Leach and Adelaide characterized Bartlett as emotionally unstable during his sickness. Adelaide told the doctor that Edwin sometimes cried "an hour at a time," and when she asked him why, he said that "it was because he was so happy" (*Trial* 220).

Another development recounted by Leach was almost as medically puzzling as Edwin's inexplicable mercury poisoning. A couple of days before Christmas Adelaide announced that Edwin had that morning passed a lumbricoid worm. Mysteriously, Leach could find no symptoms of worms, and, despite keeping close track of Edwin's stools, he was never able to find another one. Furthermore, the autopsy a little over a week later revealed no trace of worms. Nevertheless, Edwin, in his weakened and nervous condition, insisted he could feel worms trying to crawl up his throat. Prior to the worm episode, Leach had made plans to send his patient to Torquay to recover his health away from the influence of his wife, who the doctor felt facilitated Edwin's mental susceptibility and illness by overindulging him. The discovery of the worm, however, depressed Edwin greatly and postponed the trip (*Trial* 216-17). The surprising appearance of the parasite was thus probably indirectly responsible for Edwin's death. The episode of the worm was like many other details in the Bartletts' history

that took on added significance afterwards, either at the trial or in the investigations of later researchers.

Throughout Bartlett's tribulations Adelaide seemed a model nurse and wife, exhausting herself by attending him night and day. She nevertheless had resisted the idea that a regular nurse be employed, Dyson said (*Trial* 167). She often sat in a chair by Edwin's bed, where she slept and, as she told Leach, gratified her husband by holding his toe (*Trial* 209). Adelaide's solicitude, however, made her a virtual guard. She limited visitors strictly, and when they were allowed, she tried always to be present, a custom she pursued even during Leach's many visits. Bartlett senior was annoyed at being kept away from his son on occasion. He was also suspicious of the care Edwin was receiving, his doubts bolstered by his long-held animus towards his daughter-in-law. At one point he persuaded Leach and Adelaide to let another physician look at the patient, but this doctor found nothing much wrong with him; by that time the superficial evidence of mercurial poisoning had disappeared. Adelaide apparently felt that her proprietary care of her husband left her open to disapproval generally; Leach remembered her saying, "Doctor, Mr. Bartlett's friends will accuse me of poisoning him if he does not get out soon—if he gets worse—if he does not get better" (*Trial* 199). This prophetic statement, of course, seems remarkable in retrospect.

During the illness the Reverend Mr. Dyson had continued to visit the Bartletts, although less frequently and with shorter stays; sometimes he saw Edwin, sometimes not. According to Dyson, on December 27 Adelaide received him with a strange request: she wanted him to get some liquid chloroform, which she said she was accustomed to use on her husband because the fumes eased his discomfort. Bartlett was critically ill, she claimed; Doctor Nichols had given him only a year to live, and the chloroform was necessary. She told Dyson that she was skilled with medicines but needed him to get the chemical to avoid doubts about her competence (*Trial* 139). She had turned to Dyson because the nurse, Annie Walker, who usually got it for her was in America. Adelaide's statements about Nichols and Walker were lies, as she later admitted, saying that she had made up her story to secure Dyson's help (*Trial* 176). Dyson got the chloroform in several different stores, buying small amounts in each and leading the druggists, so that they would not question him, to believe that it was for removing stains. He stated that he then put all the chloroform into one bottle and gave it to Adelaide out of her husband's presence (*Trial* 141-

42). The next thing Dyson heard about chloroform was that it had been discovered in the stomach of the dead Edwin. He was very disturbed by the news.

Edwin's death came all the more unexpectedly because the day before he had seemed much improved, having eaten heartily, contemplated his trip to Torquay, and resolved to get up early the next morning to consume the large haddock he had ordered for breakfast. In the early hours of January 1 Adelaide reported her husband's death; she said she had fallen asleep in a chair beside his bed and awakened several hours later to find him cold. When the Bartletts' landlord, who also happened to be the local registrar of deaths, searched about the room, he found on the mantel within reach of Edwin's bed a glass threequarters full and smelling of brandy and some drug (*Trial* 119). The bottle of chloroform was never located, even by a police search, although Adelaide said it had been on the mantel all night and had remained for a number of days in a drawer where she placed it the next morning. Eventually she had emptied the bottle and thrown it away, she stated. After Edwin's post-mortem revealed the presence of chloroform, the disturbed Dyson unsuccessfully tried to get Adelaide to give him an account of what she had done with his purchase. He also asked for his poem back. At the inquest he made a clean breast of his involvement with Edwin's death, and he reported, creating a "sensation," that Adelaide had suggested they protect each other, saying to him that "if I did not incriminate her she might be perfectly sure she would not incriminate me," a suggestion he had rejected (*Times* 12 Feb. 1886: 12). Also at the inquest an acquaintance reported Dyson's lament that he had been "duped by a wicked woman" (*Times* 16 Feb 1886: 10). This statement created an unfavorable impression of ungallantry and self-concern.

Adelaide was charged with murder, and Dyson was held as an accessory after the fact. The prosecution, however, decided that the evidence was insufficient for convicting the minister. At the beginning of the trial it dropped its case against him, and thus Dyson was able to testify for the prosecution. Adelaide's testimony came indirectly. On January 27, after she had become a serious suspect, she found occasion to meet with Dr. Leach and make a detailed statement to him about her marriage and the circumstances surrounding Edwin's death. It was via Leach that Adelaide's story was told in court. Leach uncritically accepted everything the suspect imparted to him and in turn, at the inquest and trial, presented the accused in a very positive light. In Leach's account, Adelaide admitted lying to

Dyson about the purpose of the chloroform. The real reason for the chloroform, as explained by Adelaide to Leach, was so titillating that it transformed the Bartlett case into a *cause célèbre*. According to Adelaide, the need for chloroform arose out of a string of circumstances engendered by her husband's pathological broad-mindedness.

When at the inquest Leach quoted Adelaide as saying that her husband actually "gave" her to Dyson, an ordained minister, a gasp arose from the appreciative courtroom (Bridges 193). In Leach's rendition, Adelaide said that Edwin, who "liked to surround her with male acquaintances" but kept her apart from female friends, had thrown her and Dyson together. The highly sympathetic Leach characterized her position as "a trying one for a woman to comport herself in—not to say cruel" (*Times* 9 Feb. 1886: 10). Edwin particularly encouraged the couple to kiss each other in his presence, Mrs. Bartlett asserted. Eventually Edwin had reached an understanding with his wife and Dyson that she was now the minister's and that they would marry as soon as Edwin died. Adelaide denied that adultery was involved but said she had felt herself affianced to Dyson.

Adelaide had another fascinating story to tell as background for her procurement of chloroform. She claimed that Edwin had from the start forced upon her a "platonic compact" whereby husband and wife agreed to eschew all sexual relations. According to her, only once had she and her husband made love in their ten-year marriage, and that was when Adelaide, longing for a child, had talked Edwin into the act. That single occasion, Adelaide alleged, led to the conception of their stillborn baby (*Trial* 205). Edwin also believed, Adelaide said, that every man should have two wives, one for companionship and one for "use"—a term that implied domestic service and, perhaps, sex. Adelaide had been cast into the role of companion (*Trial* 229). She depicted herself as a helpless victim, both of her husband's peculiarities and of the circumstances that had imposed the marriage upon her in the first place.

Mrs. Bartlett used her supposedly chaste marriage and bequeathal to Dyson to explain the delicate matter of chloroform: shortly before his death, while he was suffering from his mysterious ailments but feeling better, Edwin had begun pestering Adelaide to have sex with him. This surprising emergence of her husband's libido after ten years distressed Adelaide greatly, for she felt it would be wrong to have sex with her husband when she now, in effect, belonged to another. Adelaide's novel solution for her dilemma was to obtain chloroform, put it on a handkerchief, and wave it in

front of her husband's face to extinguish his ardor. It was out of modesty that she had lied to Dyson about her intentions. She had never used the chloroform, she claimed; on the evening before he died she had shown it to Edwin, who examined the bottle and placed it on the mantel (*Trial* 207). Adelaide's proffering of the bottle was accompanied by her explanation of why she could not have sexual intercourse with him. Edwin took what she said calmly but then turned over in his bed while his wife went to sleep in the nearby chair. Adelaide's counsel, Mr. Edward Clarke, would make her strange tale one of his chief lines of defence. Mrs. Bartlett's story so muddied the water that it remains murky to this day.

The trial of Adelaide Bartlett centred on whether she had somehow administered the chloroform or whether Edwin had drunk it to commit suicide out of depression over his medical condition and his wife's firmness in rejecting his sexual advances.⁵ "The Pimlico Mystery" was the first known instance of alleged murder by liquid chloroform, and there was a great deal of testimony from medical experts about how anyone could possibly drink—or be caused to ingest—chloroform, an act attended by many difficulties. For example, drinking chloroform would normally cause screaming, facial contortion, and vomiting, all apparently absent in Edwin's death; and being made to swallow the substance while unconscious through chloroform inhalation was unlikely because of the attendant paralysis of the throat muscles. Perhaps one could pour it down the throat of a person anesthetized by chloroform while sleeping. This was the theory of the Attorney-General, Sir Charles Russell, who prosecuted the case himself. But this procedure would almost certainly leave marks on the windpipe that were lacking in Edwin (*Trial* 279-80).⁶

Adelaide's defence was helped both by uncertainties about the action of liquid chloroform and by evidence of Edwin's strangeness. He had indeed expressed some odd ideas to Dr. Leach. And although Dyson stated that Adelaide had not been given to him, he acknowledged that there was an understanding that he would take care of her should Edwin die and that this caretaking would entail marriage. While denying that Edwin had asked him to kiss his wife in front of him, he admitted having kissed her both in and out of her husband's presence (*Trial* 150). Furthermore, Dyson claimed that Edwin had asked him if there was a biblical precedent for having two wives and had discussed the matter on other occasions (*Trial* 152). Edwin's supposed peculiarities, however, were denied by his father and friends, who painted him as a cheerful, sound-minded man of conventional ideas. As

with Adelaide, who alternately was pictured as a devoted wife and a cunning criminal, Edwin comes across, like one of those pictures that changes appearance as it is shifted back and forth, as a figure flickering between two aspects—those of a stolid, responsible businessman and a neurotic oddball. Edward Clarke characterized Edwin Bartlett as a man of such monumental eccentricity that he rejected sex with his wife, gave her to another, abruptly changed his mind about marital relations, caused his wife to buy chloroform to protect her honor, and then drank it himself when she refused his advances.

II

The presiding judge, the Right Honorable Sir Alfred Wills, Kt., was having none of it. A hard-headed realist, he was not about to place credence in largely uncorroborated tales of marital esoterism, and he made his scepticism felt throughout Adelaide Bartlett's trial. He presented himself as a simple, straightforward common man who had little patience with vagueness, prolixity, reticence, or far-fetched speculation. He was weightily conventional, at once worldly and moralistic. He delivered his articulate pronouncements in a calm and measured fashion, and when displeased he could be dryly caustic. Wills is known today, if at all, as the judge who, nine years after the Bartlett trial, presided at the third and culminating trial of Oscar Wilde. There his normally reasonable demeanor was swamped by moral revulsion. In passing judgment and exacting the harshest sentence allowable, he expressed his outrage at the act of sodomy, pronounced Wilde and his accomplice "dead to all sense of shame," and declared the proceedings "the worse case I have ever tried" (Hyde 339). Wills's antagonistic strains of objectivity and moral irritability also appeared in the Adelaide Bartlett trial where they worked to her benefit.

Alfred Wills was born in 1828. His father, a solicitor, wrote a book on circumstantial evidence that his son edited through a number of editions. Probably Wills's no-nonsense demeanor, his self-image as a common man, and his strict rectitude can be traced in part to his Unitarian background. It was his religion that caused him to attend University College, London, rather than Cambridge or Oxford, where he was barred because of his "heretical" affiliation. Wills won scholarships in college and served for many years with distinction as a circuit judge. He was a member of various councils and committees and for a number of years was an examiner at

London University. In 1884 he was appointed to the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court and knighted.

Wills's great enthusiasm was the Alps, to which he had retired as a young man in a successful attempt to overcome a chronic and debilitating insomnia (*Times* 10 Aug. 1912: 9). Wills vigorously rambled about the mountains and later wrote two books about his experiences in Switzerland. In 1858 he helped found the Alpine Club, which he served as its third president. Wills's moralism, his abhorrence of ethical or mental obliquity, found expression in the club's faith in the interdependence of healthy bodies and minds. "The Alpine Club placed an emphasis on vigor, and through vigor on moral health," notes Michael Cotsell, who adds that "the ethos of the period" is embodied in Wills's *Wanderings Among the High Alps* (1856) (Cotsell 3: 29).⁷ Something of the solidity of a hiker and mountain climber was reflected in Wills's legal personality, in his noted ability to surmount the most complicated of cases and arrive at a balanced judgment. Certainly his high-mindedness seemed Alpine. According to his obituary, "In the profession Mr. Wills had the character of an integrity almost austere—in fact, he was a sort of legal Aristides" who was "recognized as a pattern of scrupulous fairness" (*Times* 10 Aug. 1912: 9).

At the Bartlett trial Wills showed both his ability to deal with complexities and his desire for fairness, even though the moral ambiguities of the case would overcome his impartiality in regard to Adelaide. Throughout Wills demonstrated his characteristic desire to get at the truth. Therefore Dr. Leach's testimony, frequently self-regarding, grandiloquent, and indirect, was particularly bothersome for the judge. Wills at one point told Leach to "think less about your share in the matter . . ." (*Trial* 228). When Leach said that it went without saying that Bartlett "was a man of very strange ideas," the judge responded that "nothing goes without saying here. Please to take that as an axiom" (*Trial* 230). After ineffectually trying to explain why he thought Bartlett and his wife might actually have had a platonic relationship, the doctor concluded that he got that impression from "the general dispositions of the parties," adding, "I am sure your lordship sees it." Wills told him, "I have not this delicate discrimination. I am a plain man . . . if I came to that conclusion with regard to people I knew, I should probably have some reason to give it" (*Trial* 242). As a plain man, Wills spoke openly of sexual matters and biological functions, even rebuking Dr. Leach for using "unnecessary paraphrasis" for a chamberpot (*Trial* 392). The judge more than once chastised Leach for his "delicacy," a quality he also

rejected in Dyson. The minister, when urged to describe a conversation with Bartlett about Dyson's relationship with Adelaide, protested that "this is a very delicate matter for me." Wills replied, "No, no; we have long outstepped the bounds of delicacy" (*Trial* 156).

Appropriately, it was the blunt, sceptical judge who played the main role in fatally wounding Adelaide's delicate story of enforced chastity and chloroform. The last-minute revelations elicited by Judge Wills galvanized the courtroom. After the prosecution finished its summing-up, and just before the judge was to begin his jury charge, Adelaide's counsel, Edward Clarke, obtained permission to have Annie Walker, Adelaide's one-time nurse, return to the witness stand; he wanted further support for Adelaide's story of sexual continence. Clarke asked the lady if she had heard anything about the Bartletts' having had sex only once, and she answered affirmatively. But then Judge Wills posed an additional question: "What was it?—That it happened only once—on a Sunday afternoon. She said so?" Annie Walker's response helped demolish Adelaide's alibi by revealing for the first time that the Bartletts had had a sex life and habitually used contraceptives: "Both of them; that there was always some preventive used" (*Trial* 366). Thus it had been the lack of contraception, not the act itself, that had been unusual. In his charge, Wills reinforced Walker's testimony by recalling a detail that somehow had attracted little attention earlier during a policeman's brief inventory of items found in the Bartletts' quarters. In the pocket of Edwin's pants had been discovered "French letters"—the Victorian term for condoms. It was obvious to Wills that Edwin was accustomed to using them with Adelaide (*Trial* 398).⁸

Wills undermined the tale of the platonic compact, but his detailed charge, which takes up thirty-five crowded pages in the published trial record, greatly favored Adelaide nonetheless. Yet early reviews of the trial showed no clear-cut awareness of Wills's partiality, and some even thought he had treated Mrs. Bartlett harshly. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, for instance, agreed with the *Standard*, quoting its conclusion that "Mr. Justice Wills unquestionably summed up for a conviction" (*Pall Mall Gazette* 19 Apr. 1886: 3). The *Times*, however, believed "Wills' charge leaned to the side of mercy" (*Times* 19 Apr. 1886: 9). The *Spectator* characterized the charge "as a model of impartiality," a position it supported with evidence of the widespread variance among the public and in press accounts about whether Wills had been for or against the accused. To the *Spectator* Wills's care for Adelaide's interests evinced "an even exaggerated desire for fair play"

(*Spectator* 24 Apr. 1886: 544). In 1926 William Roughead characterized the charge as a "masterly and fair review of the evidence," while for Yselt Bridges it was "a minute and masterly analysis of the evidence" (Roughead 247; Bridges 229).⁹

A number of factors explain the general failure to recognize Wills's favoritism. First, the judge's summing-up, accompanied by protestations of fairness and objectivity, was long and complicated. The most accurate description of Wills's performance is that of Nigel Morland, who, giving free rein to his metaphorical impulses, captures something of the excess and confusion of Wills's charge to the jury: "In his summing-up, Mr. Justice Wills might be said to have mounted a series of judicial hobby horses, some of which he rode in all directions and others he flogged to death with . . . whips composed of horrified clichés" (Morland 117). Moreover, in 1886 the Judge's sympathy for Adelaide was shared already by almost everyone. In addition, his bias was sometimes expressed by what he refrained from saying. He not only overlooked a number of matters that might have negatively affected her, like that of her alleged adultery, but also, when he discussed damaging evidence, did so in a theoretical manner that distanced it from her person. Even in his most direct personal attack, when he said that the Bartletts appeared "abundantly vulgar and commonplace in their habits" because of their use of contraception, he immediately swerved aside to attack Dr. Leach for his romanticized testimony (*Trial* 398). Finally, the judge saved until the end his discussion of contraception, which he then treated in the abstract, with no direct reference to Adelaide's lies or likely culpability for Edwin's death now that her stated purpose in getting chloroform was no longer supported by the tale of unheard-of sexual arrangements. No doubt the Judge's vigorous dismissal of the story counted against Adelaide.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the accumulated weight of points in her favor that he had cited earlier, along with his brief recapitulation of these afterwards, benefited Adelaide.

Although Wills saw himself as a plain, direct man, he advocated a degree of imagination and speculation in a jury charge, stating that a judicial summing-up should not be "a wholly colourless thing" (*Trial* 379). He indeed amply demonstrated his willingness to go beyond the basic elements of the case as they had been presented, not least of all in his moralistic commentary concerning sexual propriety. Wills was deeply imbued with the concept, typical of his time and class, that respectable ladies must be protected from the vulgarities of life, especially sexuality.

Female delicacy had to be maintained. Twice-married (his first wife had died), the father of two daughters, and the product of what was probably a moralistic religious background, the judge no doubt knew about protecting females. Wills conformed to the standard line that women were weak and easily corruptible, and hence any man was very low indeed who would compromise a defenceless, respectable woman by despoiling her ignorance. Now Adelaide Bartlett, the illegitimate child of an influential man, was well educated and accomplished but was forced by circumstances into marrying a man older and less genteel than she. The accused, whose appearance and deportment spoke of refinement, had been subjected to Edwin and Dyson, apparent cads. The public, influenced by Leach's and Clarke's treatment of Adelaide as a victim, was soon on her side, and the judge was also sympathetic towards this woman who should have been better protected from impropriety. In this Wills was little different from the staid *Times*, which, despite extensive coverage of the trial, protected its readers by deleting every direct reference to sexuality.¹¹

Thus Mr. Justice Wills roundly condemned the indecent *Esoteric Anthropology*, with its sexual content and discussion of contraception.¹² Although the book was probably Adelaide's, the idea of her ownership never entered Wills's head; it had to be Edwin's, for certainly no respectable woman could have owned it. The judge was thus scandalized by Edwin, who must have corrupted his wife by exposing her to smut: "Whatever shame may attend the possession of and the reading of such books should not fall too heavily upon the wife. One can hardly think that in any decent household, and with any decent husband, such books would be put before the wife." Without evidence Wills contended that Edwin had encouraged Adelaide to read the book. To the judge *Esoteric Anthropology* was "garbage." The book, according to Wills, represented a reason to feel sorry for Adelaide: "it should excite a feeling of pity for the unhappy woman, made in early life the companion of a man who could throw such literature in her way" (*Trial* 371-72). The judge readily impugned the dead husband's character elsewhere: he speculated that Edwin had had syphilis (*Trial* 381), although Dr. Leach had found no evidence of it, and contended that the French letters, the sort of thing that might be owned by a man who could contract syphilis, had been used extra-domestically as well as at home (398).

Most of Wills's disdain, however, fell not on the husband but on Dyson, whom he repeatedly denounced. The judge was scandalized that a

"Christian minister" should have entered into an improper relationship with a married woman. He in fact accused Dyson of having ruined a happy marriage: if the Bartletts hadn't met Dyson, "they would have continued probably to this hour to be living happily and comfortably together." Wills blamed Dyson, not Adelaide, for their affair. For example, he censured him for "letting her sit at his knee . . . with her head reclining on his lap" (*Trial* 372-73). The judge's comment about the position of Adelaide's head is interesting in that the evidence, twice repeated in the testimony of the maid, was only that her head had rested against Dyson's knee (*Trial* 128, 131-32); Wills supplied extra connotations of intimacy, thus heightening Dyson's blame.

Wills's greatest grievance against Dyson was that he was out to save his own neck at the expense of Adelaide's. Therefore, in regard to a point of testimony disputed by Adelaide and Dyson, the judge in effect took her side by reminding the jury that the minister "had got a story to tell before the coroner, and Dyson was very determined, whatever happened, that he should run no unnecessary risk, and I should think he was perfectly careless how much he put on this woman, and how little he left on his own shoulders" (*Trial* 380). Later he said, "I can see in his conduct no trace of any chivalry . . ." (*Trial* 388). Early on Wills had warned the jury that Dyson's testimony was not trustworthy (*Trial* 375), even though he had not been caught in any lies during his testimony. To Wills he was "a tainted source" (*Trial* 394). Reluctance to trust Dyson and his story could only help Adelaide. Wills in fact had established Dyson's benefit for Adelaide at the very beginning of his summing-up when he argued that the dropping of charges against him ensured that his suspicious actions would not increase her appearance of guilt. This circumstance was "an immense gain to her," the judge said (*Trial* 368-69), thus planting the concept that Adelaide's burden of apparent guilt could be lessened.

Wills also had little use for Bartlett senior. He referred to the "Judas" kiss with which Edwin's father had departed from Adelaide after his son's death; old Bartlett had immediately suspected his daughter-in-law, who unjustly had had to live, according to the judge, "under suspicious eyes." The statements of Edwin's father were to be regarded with suspicion as those of a man capable of signing and later disowning a document, as he had done in regard to his charges of adultery against Adelaide (*Trial* 370).¹³ Therefore the possibility that Adelaide was an adulteress was slighted, as it had been throughout the trial.

Dr. Leach fared no better than the elder Bartlett. From Leach, according to the judge, one often got "the impressions of a not very strong-headed man painfully haunted by the idea that he is the central personage in a drama of surpassing interest" (*Trial* 390). Although the judge's hostility toward Leach could not work directly to Adelaide's benefit, Leach seemed one more in the circle of weak or deplorable men suffered by Adelaide, a helpless woman hemmed in and victimized by moral or mental simpletons. She looked positively good in comparison, and Wills increased the contrast by exonerating her of specific suspicions and at times almost praising her.

First of all, Adelaide had been a good and dutiful wife: "Every piece of evidence we have throughout the case points to the conduct of a devoted wife, and I must say everything given in evidence seems to me perfectly natural" (*Trial* 382). Wills went on in this vein at some length. Secondly, in even greater detail he pursued the defence's position that she was unlikely to have killed Edwin in the way specified by the prosecution. He even put aside the theory of criminal administration of poison to offer his own theory, which he was justified in doing because his "speculation" was "as good as . . . anybody else's" (*Trial* 387). He weakened Adelaide's appearance of guilt by suggesting that Edwin, tired of insomnia, which the Judge said he knew well from his own experience, mistook the chloroform for something that would help him sleep, poured it into a glass, and gulped it down (*Trial* 386-87).¹⁴ The man's death agonies were apparently not sufficient to alarm his wife or contort his face. Thirdly, Wills undercut the issue, damaging for Adelaide, of the history of the chloroform bottle after Edwin's death. Adelaide apparently had lied in saying that the bottle remained on the mantel, and she had admitted disposing of it after she learned it was implicated in the death. Wills earlier had said that the absence of the bottle was "difficult beyond measure to account for if all was right" (*Trial* 390), but near the end of his speech he allowed that he "did not want to make too much of this disappearance of the bottle" because Adelaide's knowledge that she was under suspicion would have caused her to act as if she were guilty (*Trial* 399).

Finally, the judge counted in Adelaide's favor her asking, when it became clear there would be an autopsy, for an immediate one; had she been guilty, any delay would have favored her by vitiating the evidence (*Trial* 392-93). Her request, however, is intelligible if she knew that a large amount of chloroform was not likely to disappear given a few more days and that her look of eagerness might benefit her, and it would fit with the

residue of chloroform found in a glass if she was considering a defense of suicide (later losing confidence and throwing away the chloroform bottle when faced with the inquest that was to begin the next day). The judge did say, however, that her not cleaning out the glass spoke strongly for Adelaide, since a criminal would have tried to hide the evidence (*Trial* 389).

Wills's summing-up was a complex mixture of facts and opinions, preoccupations and antipathies, and it is difficult to detect any overall plan to his presentation. Part of his bias may well have been *de facto*, a matter of Adelaide's benefiting from the judge's hostility towards various witnesses, which was partially justified, or from his desire to advance his own theories. Nevertheless, overall he actively, however unconsciously, favored Adelaide.

III

Adelaide Bartlett's guilt is suggested by a great deal of circumstantial evidence, much of it overlooked by the judge. For that matter, the Attorney-General, who was preoccupied with a governmental crisis over Irish home rule, also missed or minimized much that might have counted against the accused.¹⁵ The prosecution, however, did stress the new will in Adelaide's favor that freed her to remarry, her supposed desire to join Dyson and escape her repugnant husband, Edwin's improved condition the day before his death by supposed suicide, Adelaide's lies told in obtaining chloroform, its disappearance, and, of course, everything concerning Adelaide's story of a non-sexual marriage, including the unlikelihood that Edwin would suddenly want sex with his wife at that particular time, during his sickness and right before his death.

Many other pieces of circumstantial evidence were either overlooked or made little use of by the prosecution. These include the following: Adelaide's possible early affair, and continued correspondence, with Frederick Bartlett, who is known to have returned temporarily to England just prior to Edwin's death and visited with Adelaide afterwards; the suspicious circumstances under which the new will was hastily written without the involvement of Bartlett's lawyer; Adelaide's inordinate restriction of visitors to her husband and close attendance on him; her statement that Edwin's relatives might suspect her of poisoning him; the appearance of the single lumbricoid worm; the Bartletts' ownership of a

pharmaceutical guide that, when handled by the coroner, fell open to a page explaining that brandy can be used as a solvent for chloroform; Adelaide's recent purchase of brandy; her misstatement to Dr. Leach, immediately after Edwin's death, that her husband could not have had access to poison; the lack of signs of disease in the victim at the post-mortem; and the medical examiner's discovery of traces of lead in Bartlett's body.

Employing such elements, Yseult Bridges has reconstructed a murder of diabolical premeditation in which Adelaide arranged her and her husband's quarters so she could watch over him and intercept visitors as she systematically poisoned him with the lead acetate that was found among her medicines for treating dogs (100-1, 242). When forced to break off her attempt because of Dr. Leach's suspicion of metal poisoning—he thought mercury the culprit—she had turned to other means, perhaps so she could rejoin Frederick (243, 249-50).¹⁶ When it looked as if Edwin might escape her by going to Torquay, Adelaide got a worm, easily had at the Bartletts' kennel, and planted it in Edwin's stool (127-28).

The keystone of Bridges's case is her argument that Adelaide knew how to hypnotize and had rendered her husband susceptible to her suggestions; thus Bridges accounts for Edwin's strange utterances and actions, like the sudden alteration of his will (245).¹⁷ Most importantly, mesmerism offers an answer to the pivotal question of how the chloroform was administered: after Adelaide mixed it with brandy, Edwin calmly drank it himself under his wife's hypnotic control (243-47). Bridges notes that Edwin was easily hypnotized—Dr. Leach himself had done it to help him get through his dental ordeals—and uses Bartlett's belief that he was being hypnotized and that his wife was somehow involved. Bridges asserts, as part of her detailed argument, that Adelaide's ability to hypnotize came from Dyson, although, because there is no real evidence for this, Mary Hartman more reasonably nominates Mary Grove Nichols as the source of Adelaide's supposed prowess (204). Adelaide picked New Year's Eve to commit the murder, Bridges suggests, because the party going on below might obscure cries from the victim and later make the Bartletts' landlords less likely to notice anything amiss (246). After the murder, Adelaide made up the fire so the draught would take away the smell of chloroform, and she delayed reporting Edwin's death for the same reason and so she could further doctor the evidence (155, 247). Bridges's overall case against Adelaide Bartlett, while not conclusive, is very impressive. Most of the writers who have analyzed the evidence have concluded that Adelaide was probably guilty.¹⁸

In 1886, without the benefit of research and a long retrospective view, some observers had already concluded that Adelaide got away with murder. Sir James Paget, surgeon to Queen Victoria, is quoted as saying, "Once it was over, she should have told us, in the interests of science, how she did it" (Walker-Smith 187). The mystery about how she could have done it was crucial, and no matter how much circumstantial evidence had been adduced at the trial, it probably would have remained a sticking point. This and the many other ambiguities and uncertainties in the case filled the courtroom like a cloud of chloroform, numbing discrimination and subduing the impulse to adopt definitive judgements. The *Times* found the verdict "inevitable" because of the reasonable doubt likely to be left in jurors' minds (*Times* 19 Apr. 1886: 9). Furthermore, there was, as Mary Hartman says, a nineteenth-century pattern of probable murderesses from the "respectable" classes escaping conviction or serious punishment, as did most of those in her own study of the subject (1). Sympathy generally went out to the middle-class woman accused of murder, especially if it seemed she had been somehow mistreated.

Adelaide Bartlett was fortunate not only in her social class, but also in her behind-the-scenes father, whose money and influence secured the best legal help. The defense of Edward Clarke was brilliant. He stressed Edwin Bartlett's alleged strangeness, characterized Adelaide as a dutiful wife who had been victimized, exploited animosity towards George Dyson for having escaped trial when Adelaide did not, and, through skilful cross-examination of leading medical authorities, demonstrated that murder by the method advanced by the prosecution was unlikely. Unlike the Attorney-General, Clarke had mastered the minutiae of the case in a way that gave authority to his speeches. Most importantly, to Adelaide's defence he brought awe-inspiring fervor and rhetorical skill. Judge Wills called Clarke's marathon summing-up, which lasted six hours, a "remarkable display of forensic eloquence" (*Trial* 374).¹⁹ Clarke was cheered when he sat down, and after the trial, when he left the Old Bailey, his carriage was attended by an enthusiastic crowd. That night at the opera he was greeted by more cheers (Clarke, *Story* 253).

Nevertheless, along with other factors that contributed to Adelaide's escape, it is probable that Judge Wills's charge to the jury influenced the outcome; "his observations weighed heavily with the Jury," one review concluded (*Spectator* 24 Apr. 1886: 544). The jury's reasons for its decision support this contention. When Wills asked for the verdict following the

jury's two-hour deliberation, the jury foreman answered, "We have considered the evidence, and, although we think grave suspicion is attached to the prisoner, we do not think there is sufficient evidence to show how or by whom the chloroform was administered." The clerk of the court had them simplify their unusual response: "Then you say that the prisoner is not guilty, gentlemen?" "Not guilty," the foreman then pronounced (*Trial* 402). Some students of the Bartlett trial have taken the spokesman's initial statement at face value to mean that the jurors thought she was quite probably guilty but had sufficient doubts to keep them from convicting her. The foreman of the jury, however, wrote to the *Times* several days after the trial and explained that he had issued the first version of the verdict because one juror alone had obstinately advocated it; the other jurors felt it was better to pronounce that verdict than to prolong the proceedings further, subjecting "Mrs. Bartlett to all the agony and expense of a second trial." As a whole, the jury, like Wills, was concerned about the welfare of Mrs. Bartlett, whom it considered not merely "not guilty," but actually innocent. And most likely they reached this conclusion in part because of the judge's theory that Bartlett had knowingly drunk the poison in response to his chronic insomnia:

Eleven of our number were in favour of a verdict of "Not guilty," with a rider that "we were of opinion that, considering the state of health Mr. Bartlett was in . . . and the state of mind the evidence showed him to be in, he administered the chloroform to himself with the view of obtaining sleep or committing suicide" . . . (*Times* 20 Apr. 1886: 8)

Clearly, the jury was also impressed by Clarke's argument that Edwin's depressed and mentally disordered condition during his sickness caused him to commit suicide. Edwin's alleged strangeness throughout his married life probably further contributed to the picture of a man capable of virtually anything.

It is impossible to know how much Wills's charge influenced the jury and its verdict; like most aspects of this enigmatic case, that issue also resists any definitive resolution. In any event, the point here is not that Wills forced the outcome or that his behavior was unusual for his time or worthy of censure. More significant is that he was so completely a man of his age that his prejudices were largely invisible to the contemporary critics and commentators. Naturally, they had been inculcated with many of the same attitudes as the judge.

IV

Of the cultural vectors that intersected at the Bartlett trial and influenced Mr. Justice Wills's attitudes, one of the strongest, as well as most threatened, was the doctrine of separate spheres. This mindset, says Joan N. Burstyn, placed "women in the home and men in the marketplace, and consequently public and private space became more clearly defined." Thus, "Men and women of the middle classes spoke of working in separate spheres" (19). This schism between public and private, male and female, produced a divided morality that located purity and health within the home, in opposition to the corruption that seemed to prevail outside. Such attitudes lent themselves to a double standard that fostered not only different sexual rules for men and women but also the typically Victorian dichotomies of wife/prostitute, angel/harlot. The causes of these separations are complex, but certainly one reason for separate spheres was the ambition of successful middle-class males to demonstrate status through the maintenance and display of unemployed wives, large families, impressive homes, and numerous servants.

At the Bartlett trial Mr. Justice Wills readily fell into standard discourse about divided realms and the need to protect the domestic one from unwholesomeness. In response to George Dyson's alleged discussion with Edwin Bartlett about biblical precedents for polygamy, Wills asked the clergyman, "Did not it strike you as an unwholesome sort of talk in the family circle?" (*Trial* 152). Just two people, such as the Bartletts, were enough to inform, and be in-formed by, a domestic "circle" or sphere, a self-enclosing ideological space that both excludes and centres the rest of the world. When such a conceptual circle is broken by people's innate resistances to social determination or by social changes it is ill-suited to meet, then other cultural formations are also destabilized and the whole social order threatened. With his particular job and personality, Wills, as an astute keeper of orthodoxy, probably sensed that the concept of separate spheres, its attendant cult of domesticity, and the whole social fabric were by the 1880s in danger of coming unravelled.

In the late nineteenth century some women rebelled against the idea of distinct realms for men and women, and the fear this caused Victorian society can be gauged by the many published diatribes directed at women, sometimes called "wild" or "shrieking," who seemingly wanted to subvert the old order. Such women, seen as aggressive, shameless, unfeminine,

would eventually in the 1890s be called "new women," but they were already being identified by other labels in the early 1880s, when, not long before the Bartlett trial, there appeared the first of the "new women novels" espousing the abolition of traditional gender assumptions.²⁰ Perhaps the greatest opponent of this emancipative trend was Eliza Lynn Lynton, who tirelessly attacked freethinking women for over thirty years. The following is a fair specimen of the kind of argument that she and like-minded polemicists produced during the last quarter of the nineteenth century:

Women are swarming out at all doors; running hither and thither among the men . . . anxious to lay aside their tenderness, their modesty, their womanliness . . . thinking it a far higher thing to leave the home and the family to take care of themselves, or under the care of some incompetent hireling. . . . (Lynton 2: 113-14)

Such rhetoric, based upon rigid premises about the true nature of women, suggests that any woman who leaves her true sphere, the home that alone lets her express her feminine nature, must be no woman at all. Therefore there was much writing about women who sacrificed their gender in the rush to escape domesticity. Here, from 1891, is male advice on this score: "Let us teach them [women] that this specious agitation must ultimately degrade them, sterilize them, unsex them. The glory of woman is to be tender, loving, pure, inspiring in her home. . ." (Harrison 451).

Discourse about the unsexing of women is at least as old as *Macbeth*, but in the late nineteenth century it became common as a clear reactionary indication that the separate spheres were ripe for collapse. The Bartlett trial, with its audience comprised mostly of enthusiastic women, was a red flag to those men, including the preponderance of newspaper reporters, who did not want to see women out of their proper place. The *Pall Mall Gazette* expressed wonder and dismay at the female spectators at the trial:

But who are these unsexed women whom the atmosphere of a criminal court narcotizes into a happy sense of indifference to decency, women with wrinkled cheeks and grey hair who should know better, frivolous "misses" who should be at their books and blackboards, all tainted with the cravings of depraved imaginations, steeping themselves in the extraordinary details of one of the most extraordinary chapters of human life that have [*sic*] ever been laid open in a public court? (17 Apr. 1886: 4)

If merely leaving their sphere would cause women to abandon their true natures through exposure to corruption, then the delicious corruption to be sampled at the Bartlett trial must have been particularly dangerous. This is the line taken by Judge Wills, who throughout the trial showed his disapproval of the female onlookers. Women's attendance at such trials was related to their reading trash like *Esoteric Anthropology*. Both book and trial represented a serious collapse of spheres: the book signified the invasion of domestic purity by public corruption, while the trial witnessed the offensive insertion of the domestic, in the form of women, into the public. Referring to the book during his summing-up, Wills pronounced that "it is such reading as this that helps to unsex" women and bring them to courts "to listen willingly to details which . . . are distasteful and disgusting" (*Trial* 372).²¹ It will be remembered that Adelaide was not included in the judge's censure. He believed that Edwin Bartlett had inflicted the book upon his wife, and Adelaide, of course, did not brazenly come to the trial of her own volition like the other women.

It is impossible to answer precisely the *Gazette's* question about the identity of the "unsexed" women at the trial, but they were surely of middle and upper middle class origin. A significant attendance of aristocrats would have been noted, and the women were not lower class, for newspapers agreed that they were well dressed and had free time to spend at murder trials. What was distressing about them was not just that they were present, but that they were not appropriately genteel. Instead, they were perceived as loud, pushy, and too obviously appreciative of the drama that was unfolding before them. More than one article described them as ghoulishly indifferent to the fate of the poor, lonely defendant, who had won journalistic hearts with her good looks and quiet bearing. To the *Evening Standard* their behavior was scandalous:

Well-dressed women of mature age [monopolized] the seats reserved for a mixed public, and special places [were] occupied by young persons of the female sex, to whom the evidence must have revealed facts of a most dangerous character, many of which the public newspapers, in the interest of morality, suppressed. The scene in court day by day throughout the week was regarded as a scandal upon the national honour, and in spite of the plainest hints from the learned Judge, Mr. Justice Wills, women and young girls, fashionably dressed, maintained their places, and in the intervals of adjournment tittered and laughed over the Judge's prudery. They did far more than this on Saturday, for during the interval for luncheon, many

ladies fixed gold eyeglasses in their eyes, or set opera-glasses on the troubled face of her who sat in the dock alone, and almost without one sympathetic eye in the crowded court. (19 Apr. 1886: 5)

It should be remembered that in the nineteenth century "prudery" was a common pejorative term for a well-identified attitude, and that Victorian beliefs were always contested and contradictory. Those attitudes that we think of as typically Victorian were never as monolithic as they later came to seem. Prudery had always had some detractors, even among middle-class women. Many of the women at the trial were not young, and their apparent resistance to prudery was unlikely to have been of entirely recent vintage.

It is also unlikely that their behavior was unsympathetic. That negative interpretation was an extension of disapproval about their being present in the first place and acting in an "unwomanly" fashion. Despite the carnivalesque atmosphere that surrounded the trial, the women in attendance were on Adelaide's side. The strange trial of course provided much titillation for women out of their sphere and on holiday, but Elizabeth Villiers seems essentially correct in stating that "Adelaide Bartlett was remarkable amongst women who have stood at the dock, inasmuch as practically every woman in England was hot in her favour" (46). Their support of her was particularly prompted by disdain for George Dyson, who at both the inquest and the trial appeared preoccupied with saving his own skin by distancing himself from Adelaide. Villiers reports that one woman called the minister "Judas" as he left the witness stand at the trial.²²

In their presence at the Old Bailey, in their vocal resentment of male mistreatment, in their freedom to laugh at prudery, in these respects the female spectators seem akin to the new women that conservative writers were already identifying in order to attack (and thus helping to create) at the time of the Bartlett trial. Exactly who or what new women were is not clear, since the concept is imprecise, entailing a loose amalgam of unconventional behaviors and an abstract ideal, positive or negative, that could only be approximated. Such women were known, however, to pursue vocations, avocations, styles, and behaviors generally thought appropriate only for men. Ann Ardis argues that the new women, unlike earlier female social activists, were no longer single-issue protesters who accepted standard "sex, gender, and class distinctions" (17). The female spectators at the trial also evinced a range of resistances to dominant attitudes. Although they apparently did not smoke or wear masculine clothing, clearly they were tied

in with the social changes associated with the new woman phenomenon. An irony is that the old dispensation that allowed middle-class women much leisure time, and in many cases servants to look after their children, eventually provided enough boredom, discontent, and opportunity to impel some of them out into the public sphere and towards a new view of themselves and society.

The quasi-new women at the trial were in agreement with the conservative Mr. Justice Wills in one respect, for they also favored Adelaide. However, their motivation certainly was far different. Perhaps her appearance appealed to them: contemporary prints showed an attractive young woman with short, curly hair, unusual for the time. She looked as if she knew her own mind well enough to forsake the dominant style of luxuriant hair, which was considered womanly. Her image might well have reinforced the appeal of her situation. It appears that women came to court, not only to support, but also to celebrate Adelaide, who had somehow escaped from her station and from male exploitation to stand as an imperilled beacon, in whose glare matters of actual innocence and guilt were effaced. For the younger generation it was becoming clear that victimization of women could be resisted more readily through their own knowledge and efforts than through the help of male protectors like the judge, whose passion for female delicacy and ignorance was typical of the forces that made women so vulnerable in the first place. Thus they could laugh at his prudery in condemning them for leaving their proper, protected sphere to attend unpleasant trials.

But in their freedom to ridicule old stereotypes while uncritically accepting their heroine's self-presentation, the female spectators highlight Adelaide's apparent subtlety in exploiting sexual strictures while influencing her defense through Dr. Leach's retelling of her story. Her support by women was a bonus, whereas her relatively mild treatment at the hands of Mr. Justice Wills was just the sort of response her bizarre tale of male oppression was likely, and probably calculated, to elicit. She stood out for Wills, in relation both to the other women in the courtroom and to the men she had known, as a particularly sympathetic figure. In this Adelaide Bartlett benefited from the unstable complex of ideological distinctions that ordered middle-class gender perceptions in late nineteenth-century England. The trial occurred at a particular point in history, and that, as usual, made the difference.

NOTES

1. Nevertheless, the trial has generated in this century a fair-sized body of literature. Most of this consists of chapter-length accounts in collections of crime and trial narratives; however, it has also been the basis for a British radio play and for a novel, Julian Symons's *Sweet Adelaide: A Victorian Puzzle Solved*.
2. The influence of Adelaide Bartlett's father explains her obtaining the best legal help, including Edward Clarke, her highly-regarded counsel (Bridges 173-74).
3. Mary Hartman provides a valuable look at free-love movements, the careers of the Nicholsons, and the probable impact of their work on Mrs. Bartlett (199-204).
4. The book mostly concerns physiology, pathology, and Nichols's various therapeutic enthusiasms. It deals openly with sexual matters, touching upon the forbidden subjects of contraception and abortion but stressing that sex should be voluntary and intended only for procreation within a loving relationship.
5. According to Altick, the defence maintained that Bartlett voluntarily drank the chloroform to remove himself as an obstacle to the felicity of his wife and Dyson. Hartman says the same, quoting Altick's comment that this defense "had a distinct air of desperation" (Hartman 203; Altick 243). Clarke, however, only stated that Edwin committed suicide out of depression over his bad health and sexual rejection. The confusion probably arises from the prosecutor's later exaggerated rendition of Clarke's argument (*Trial* 336-37, 351).
6. An expert witness said that the mode of death specified by the Attorney-General was possible but "a very difficult operation" to achieve. The defence also argued that if Adelaide had rendered her husband insensible through inhalation of chloroform, she would have just continued the process until he died. In his summing-up the prosecutor belatedly submitted the theory, disallowed by the judge, that Adelaide got Edwin to quaff the chloroform, diluted in brandy, by telling him it was medicine (*Trial* 280, 297, 356-57).
7. Alfred Wills also wrote *The Eagle's Nest* (1860) and translated Rendu's *Théorie des Glaciers de la Savoie* (1874).
8. Although according to Wills condoms were an objectionable subject (*Trial* 371), it seems likely, judging from his unelaborated reference to "French letters," that both the term and the items they denoted were common in 1886.
9. Altick has discerned Wills's "divided nature. One side of him was experienced, unflappable; the other side was puritanical . . ." (250). Mary Hartman briefly notes both the judge's disapproval of Edwin for having exposed Adelaide to *Esoteric Anthropology* and his consequent sympathy for the wife (197-98).
10. Wills had already denied any special significance to the letter that Bartlett had sent to Dyson thanking him for his own affectionate letter to Adelaide (*Trial* 376-77). Clarke, by creatively interpreting Edwin's epistle, argued that in it he was encouraging an affair between the minister and his wife (*Trial* 321-23).
11. In its report of Wills's charge to the jury, the *Times* highlighted his points in Adelaide's favor but said nothing about his references to French letters or discussion and final

dismissal of the tale of strange sexual arrangements. While Wills favored Adelaide based on her status as a genteel female, the inaccurate account of the *Times* was, in effect if not intent, doubly biased in her favor.

12. Earlier in the trial Wills noted that the book apparently dealt with contraception. Clarke responded that "the book contains nothing objectionable" and quoted a passage advocating abstinence as the only moral form of birth control. Wills thanked Clarke for "correcting my impression" and said he would look at the book more closely (*Trial* 185-86), but increased familiarity only increased his dislike. That the offending passages were relatively brief, informational, and in highly "moral" contexts did not keep him in his charge from anathematizing the entire work.
13. Although Wills did not mention the matter, the testimony of the senior Bartlett against Adelaide was suspect not only because he had long disliked his daughter-in-law, but also because he was contesting the will that left his son's considerable wealth to her alone.
14. The judge's theory, of course, could not be opposed by the prosecution, an irony in that Wills had earlier correctly disallowed a new theory made by the Attorney-General in his summing-up, when the defence could not respond (*Trial* 384).
15. Gladstone's government and Russell's position were imperilled by opposition to the second Irish Home Rule Bill, which heavily engaged the Attorney-General in various parliamentary machinations. Furthermore, he was involved in another trial at the same time as Adelaide Bartlett's.
16. Like Bridges, Mary Hartman entertains the theory that Adelaide killed Edwin so she could join Frederick, but she more fully fills out Adelaide's motive for murder. Hartman concludes that she was deeply resentful of her enforced marriage; the necessity of having sexual relations with a man she did not love; and, because of Catholic sympathies and the work of the Nicholsons, the use of contraception (198-203).
17. An overlooked explanation for the alteration of the will is that Edwin wanted to keep his estate away from Frederick, who perhaps had cuckolded him and might have married Adelaide after Edwin's death. This outcome, however, was rendered unlikely by Adelaide's new, sanctioned relationship with the Reverend Mr. Dyson.
18. John Rowland, in making his case for Adelaide's guilt, speculates that Edwin Bartlett had a mistress. This would fit in with Bartlett's talk of two wives, one for companionship and one for "use," and with the suggestion that his marriage was largely chaste; also, it might have offered Adelaide a further motive for murder (103). Although Rowland does not say so, his theory might account for the presence of condoms in Edwin's pocket.
19. At the beginning of his summing-up, Clarke protested the precedent that allowed the Attorney-General or Solicitor-General to have the final say in trials that they prosecuted. Clarke then astutely explained that he would need to talk at unusual length, making sure he overlooked nothing that the prosecution might later bring up to Adelaide's disadvantage (292-94). This manoeuvre allowed him to exercise fully his amazing oratory. In his charge, Wills defended the Attorney-General's prerogative with the Burke-like argument that the practice would not have survived so long if it did not serve some good purpose (*Trial* 366-67).

20. Ann Ardis notes that "more than a hundred novels were written about the New Woman between 1883 and 1900" (4). The new woman phenomenon and the breakdown of separate spheres was furthered by various movements of social reform that brought about, in the years prior to the Bartlett trial in 1886, greater public exposure both of women and of the inequities under which they labored. The year 1886 also produced the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the culmination of a long opposition by Josephine Butler, and 1885 witnessed W. T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of the Modern Babylon," a series of exposés in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The Acts had provoked Butler by placing prostitutes under the arbitrary power of the police and male doctors who forced them to undergo pelvic examinations. Stead's project, supported by Butler, documented the widespread exploitation of young girls forced into prostitution. These campaigns—accompanied by more general movements seeking women's suffrage, greater education for women, and "social purity" (sexual continence for both sexes)—increased awareness of various double standards.
21. Predictably, Wills's disapproving comments about the attendance of women at unsavory trials were strongly supported by the *Times* (19 Apr. 1886: 9).
22. Dyson was the focus of hostile interest at the trial, which spawned such by-products as a popular parody of his poem to Adelaide and Gould Penn's hastily produced *The Life of the Reverend George Dyson*.

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