

The Role of Cheap Fiction in the Life and Trial of Edith Thompson

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In 1923, Edith Thompson became the first woman hanged in England in sixteen years. Though her lover, Frederick Bywaters, stabbed her husband Percy Thompson in October 1922, Edith was executed after being found guilty of lethal incitement and conspiracy to murder. Her letters, full of fanciful writings about poisoning her husband, were the key pieces of “evidence” in the case. Edith’s enjoyment of cheap fiction was no secret, and it was a prevalent topic throughout her letters to Bywaters. In fact, her letters mentioned a total of nineteen novels over a period of eleven months.¹ Thompson’s obvious love of cheap fiction was a crucial part of her trial because it represented a fear of social change, inextricably linked to gender and class tensions. Cheap fiction, and the negative societal assumptions attached to it, were not only used to successfully charge Edith Thompson with murder, but were used to vilify her as immoral and deviant. Throughout this paper, I will examine the various facets of cheap fiction, including British society’s prevailing beliefs about popular fiction during the early twentieth century, to prove that Thompson’s love of cheap fiction was pivotal in her trial and indictment, and that it caused Edith Thompson to become the personification of social and moral disintegration.

Edith Thompson, born to a solid lower-middle class family in 1893, was a young woman known for her vivacity, adventurous spirit, and sense of style. In 1916, she married Percy Thompson, but she soon became disenchanted with her married life. Her husband, whom she deemed a coward because he feigned heart problems to get out of World War I, was often violent; Thompson found refuge in fiction. That same year, she met Freddy Bywaters, a handsome man eight years her junior. When Bywaters came to stay with the Thompsons in 1921, Edith and Freddy began a passionate love affair. Unlike Percy Thompson, Bywaters was a heroic figure, who had lied about his age to serve in World War I. Edith Thompson’s passion for reading was evident in her job as a bookkeeper and her numerous letters to Bywaters, in which she frequently wrote critiques of the novels she read. Edith Thompson’s obsession with romantic novels, clearly evidenced in her letters, was her downfall. The prosecution successfully argued that her letters, in which Thompson mused about ways to kill her husband, indicated intent to murder, resulting in the hanging of Thompson and Bywaters on January 9, 1923.

In the early twentieth century, the book industry was growing rapidly as was the amount of novels published.² This development saw the increase of “cheap editions and lending libraries,” which allowed more and more members of the lower classes to have access to books.³ Bessie Aitken said, “Day by day, sitting on the crowded third-class carriage that took her to work, she read omnivorously.”⁴ Aitken was talking about Edith Thompson, who was part of the suburban lower-middle class, as well as a commuter. These new commuters, often associated with the “suburban lower-middle class,” frequently read these inexpensive sensational novels, or “railway fiction,” while riding into the city.⁵ “Cheap fiction” in interwar Britain was popular fiction condemned by the upper classes as tawdry and worthless: cheap in price and cheap in substance.⁶ Despite its widespread popularity, this type of fiction was still widely censored, viewed as unintelligent and low class. Lacking intellectual value, it was considered no more than a cheap way to get thrills.

While Thompson was part of the class most associated with popular fiction, she also embodied upper-middle class fears about their rapidly changing society.⁷ Cheap fiction, with its emphasis on reckless romance, desire, and fantasy, was seen as a cause for the subversion of society and social norms. As the editor of the *Sunday Express*, Douglas presented a horrific vision of England as an immoral state, separated from “the traditional values on which it should rest.”⁸ Britain’s interwar period witnessed fears that members of the lower classes were infringing upon the widely

¹ Matt Houlbrook, “A Pin to See the Peepshow: Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson’s Letters, 1921-1922,” *Past and Present* 207 (May 2010): 230.

² Houlbrook, “A Pin to See the Peepshow,” 231; Noted.

³ Houlbrook, “A Pin to See the Peepshow,” 231; McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain*, 1992.

⁴ Lifelong Friend of Mrs. Thompson, “Mrs. Thompson’s Career from Schoolroom to Prison,” *Lloyd’s Sunday News*, 17 December 1922, 5, quoted in Lucy Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson: The Crime of Sexual Incitement in 1920s England,” *Journal of British Studies* 47 (July 2008), 639.

⁵ Lucy Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson: The Crime of Sexual Incitement in 1920s England” *Journal of British Studies* 47 (July 2008): 638-639, and Billie Melman, *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 46-47; For more on transportation and the suburbs, see H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1930), 171.

⁶ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 639.

⁷ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 638.

⁸ Houlbrook, “A Pin to See the Peepshow,” 218-219.

held belief that luxury and pleasure were reserved solely for the upper-middle-class.⁹ Books, due to their cheapness and the growth of libraries, were more readily available to the masses, no longer the sole province of the elite.

The modern woman was an example of this fear becoming reality. Modern women, often referred to as “flappers,” circumvented social norms with their fast-paced lifestyle and sexual agency.¹⁰ Cheap, sensational fiction was part of this novel, modern lifestyle, because of its thrills and fantasy. Edith Thompson, as a lower-middle class pleasure seeker, epitomized the modern woman; she commuted into London for work, wore fashionable clothes, partied, danced, smoked, gambled, and read numerous romantic novels.¹¹ Her sexual agency was evidenced in her affair with Bywaters, made even more dramatic by the fact that he was several years her junior. Modern women, such as Thompson, were viewed as dangerous for eroding class and social boundaries; their makeup and dress made it difficult to distinguish between upper class and lower class women, and their lifestyle disregarded social norms of patriarchy and sexual passivity (as opposed to agency).¹² In a similar fashion, the novels these women read deviated from these same standards and were believed to promote perilous ideals that could wreak havoc on society.

The destruction of society through cheap fiction was also viewed in stark, literal terms; people believed that reading cheap fiction would give women dangerous ideas about both murder and sexuality. The most trite and important example, since it had such a prominent role in Edith Thompson’s conviction, was the crime of poisoning. “Poisoning” was distinguished as a female crime, for it was the antithesis of the norm of women as nurturing and benevolent.¹³ Thompson’s letters were full of descriptions of the poisonings in novels she read as well as talk of poisoning her husband. Cheap fiction, especially romantic fiction, was viewed as dangerous for deviating from patriarchal values. In the *Woman Reader*, Kate Flint discussed Janice Radway’s supposition concerning women and reading romantic fiction. Radway suggests that when a woman reads a romance, she throws herself “vicariously into a passive relationship with a caring, nurturant, powerful male,” thereby dismissing her “role as a wife and mother.”¹⁴ While many past advice manuals and literature promoted morality and women’s natural instincts of nurture and family duty, cheap fiction supposedly led women astray. In addition, Edith Thompson was a married woman who was “voluntarily” childless, which was thought to be self-centered and abnormal; even the press commented upon her childless state.¹⁵ Thompson, through her obsession with romantic novels, represented the deviant woman, the dangerous woman who upset the status quo. Edith Thompson was the embodiment of their fears, exemplifying the “dangerous power of cheap fiction.”¹⁶

While reading popular novels was acceptable during World War I in order to escape the harsh realities of life during wartime, it was condemned after the Great War came to an end. During the interwar period, the “middle-class intelligista” paid special attention to a particular category of cheap fiction: romance.¹⁷ Romantic fiction was contemptible, for it appealed to desires rather than reason, promoting “dangerous fantasy.”¹⁸ As early as the nineteenth century, women who read fiction were criticized for overindulging escapism, reading to get away from their dull, ordinary lives.¹⁹ The prosecutors used the information in Thompson’s letters to Bywaters, especially the references to poison, to show that novels gave her the idea to murder her husband. The prosecution argued that Thompson’s infatuation with romantic, fanciful books led her to indulge in lethal fantasies that led to action.²⁰ The defense argued that these

⁹ Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (New York: Berg, 2004), 100.

¹⁰ Melman, *Women and Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, 28-29; Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Boston: Pandora, 1989), 23-24; For more on the media’s influence on the construction of the term “flapper,” see Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 99.

¹¹ For example, see Edith Thompson to Freddy Bywaters, 15 May 1922, and Edith Thompson to Freddy Bywaters, 14 June 1922, in Young, *Trial of Frederick Bywaters and Edith Thompson*, 189, 201. For more on the “creative” thrill of gambling, see Ross McKibbin, “Working-Class Gambling in Britain, 1880–1939,” in *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1991), 101–38.

¹² Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 631-633.

¹³ Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Stories More Terrifying than the Truth Itself: Narratives of Female Criminality in *Fin de Sie`cle Paris*,” in *Gender and Crime in Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret L. Arnot and Cornelia Osborne (London, 1999), 207.

¹⁴ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 97.

¹⁵ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 633; Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 69.

¹⁶ Houlbrook, “A Pin to See the Peepshow,” 241.

¹⁷ For the leading contemporary critique of cheap literature, see Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932). Many women writers and feminists were appalled by the popularity of romantic fiction. See Anthea Trodd, *Women’s Writing in English: Britain, 1900–1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 120. The popular press, however, in their attempts to expand their female readership, regularly serialized romance novels.

¹⁸ Matt Houlbrook, “Women Who Always Act’: Culture, Fiction, and Selfhood in the Letters of Edith Thompson” (paper presented at Modernity and Self-Fashioning in Post-World War One Britain panel, North American Conference on British Studies, Boston, 17 November 2006).

¹⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Flint, *The Woman Reader*; quoted in Lucy Bland, 2008, 639.

²⁰ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 639-640.

letters were only indicative of Thompson's overactive imagination; however, the prosecution was able to successfully convince the jury that her writings affirmed Thompson's intent to kill her husband, particularly by inciting Bywaters.²¹

Cheap fiction was thought to be perilous, especially for young women, because women were thought to be more impressionable than men; thereby easily influenced by the dangerous fantasies found in fiction. These societal assumptions were established and corroborated by a lengthy tradition of scientific study spanning decades. In fact, in the early part of the Victorian era, many believed that women's "greater sensitivity and sensibility" was grounded in biology.²² In writing on ways for women to avoid hysteria in 1851, E. J. Tilt claimed that young woman should reject romances and fiction because of their negative effect on the nervous system.²³ In 1894, Havelock Ellis wrote about women's "greater affectability" in *Man and Woman*, using both psychology and physiology as evidence.²⁴ The typical convention of women as impressionable was now supported by the novel discipline of psychoanalysis, particularly neurosis.²⁵ Women, especially compared to men, were believed to be able to personally relate to and identify with fictional characters.²⁶

The idea that cheap fiction could alter one's mental state was used against Edith Thompson in the British press and in other public venues. Several of Edith Thompson's contemporaries, such as James Douglas and Rebecca West, labeled her neurotic.²⁷ Edith's friend, Bessie Aitken, also referred to Edith's assumed ill mental state: "she (Bessie) held that books, along with plays, had 'worked upon a mind neurotic and unbalanced.'"²⁸ There was also an account of Reverend Chapman asking for Bywaters's pardon because he was "a youth subject since boyhood to the influence of a hysterical... unbalanced self-centered woman."²⁹ While the theme of Thompson as mentally unbalanced in the press is important because it influenced society's perceptions, the idea that reading copious amounts of cheap fiction could actually engender the reader to commit lethal acts was a key idea used to successfully convict Edith Thompson.

A particularly influential piece of evidence that illustrated this notion of "dangerous fantasy" was a letter in which Thompson wrote about Robert Hichens' *Bella Donna*, a book in which the wife poisons her husband.³⁰ In one of her letters, Thompson first quoted from the book, "It must be remembered that digitalin is a cumulative poison, and that the same dose if taken once, yet frequently repeated, becomes deadly."³¹ Later in the same letter, she asked Bywaters if this information was of any use.³² During the prosecution's cross-examination of Mrs. Thompson, the Solicitor-General asked Thompson questions about *Bella Donna*, making sure to mention the protagonist, Mrs. Chepstow, who attempted to poison her husband.³³ This indirect comparison between Thompson and Chepstow is an argument for identification, the notion that Edith personally identified with Mrs. Chepstow. The prosecution mentioned the reference repeatedly throughout the trial in order to convince the jury that this evidenced Edith's murderous intent toward her husband.

Even Freddy Bywaters, when asked to explain what he meant by comparing Thompson's letters to melodrama, referred to the way she identified with the characters. "She (Thompson) had a vivid way of declaring herself; she

²¹ Bland, "The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson," 640.

²² Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 54.

²³ E. J. Tilt, *On the Preservation of Health of Women at the Critical Periods of Life* (London: John Churchill, 1851), 40, quoted in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 57-58.

²⁴ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 65. For more on Havelock Ellis's contribution to the gender debate, see Flavia Alaya, "Victorian Science and the 'Genius' of Woman" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 2 (April 1977), 272-276. For more on his life, see Phyllis Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

²⁵ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 4 & 38. Various other commentators referred to Edith as "neurotic," e.g., James Douglas, "Three Clerks," *Sunday Express*, 10 December 1922, 8; Rebecca West, "Edith Thompson's Soul: Rebecca West Explores the Day-Dream Theory," *Reynold's Newspaper*, 17 December 1922, 2. See Chris Waters, "The Perils of Excessive Introspection: Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Selfhood in Britain in the 1920s" (paper presented at Modernity and Self-Fashioning in Post-World War One Britain panel, North American Conference on British Studies, Boston, 17 November 2006). The term "war neurosis" had developed during the war as an alternative to "shell-shock." See Tracey Longhran, *Shell-Shock in Britain, circa 1860-1920* (PhD diss., London University, 2006); "neurosis" without the qualifier of "war" was now being widely applied to women.

²⁶ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 38.

²⁷ Various other commentators referred to Edith as "neurotic," e.g., Douglas, "Three Clerks," 8; West, "Edith Thompson's Soul," quoted in Lucy Bland, 2008, 640.

²⁸ Lifelong friend of Mrs. Thompson, "Edith Thompson: Remarkable Interview at Holloway," *Lloyd's Sunday News*, 24 December 1922, 5, quoted in Lucy Bland, 2008, 640.

²⁹ "Society Woman's Poison Secret," *Daily Sketch*, 18 December 1922, 2, quoted in Lucy Bland, "The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson: The Crime of Sexual Incitement in 1920s England," *Journal of British Studies* 47 (July 2008), 646.

³⁰ Written in 1909, this best seller was part desert romance, part thriller. The Empire News cynically began the serialization of this book on 7 January 1923, despite having so criticized Edith, quoted in Lucy Bland, 2008, 640.

³¹ Notable British Trial Series: Filson Young (ed.), *The Trial of Frederick Bywaters and Edith Thompson* (Glasgow and Edinburgh: William Hodge and Company, Ltd, 1923), 196.

³² Young, *The Trial of Bywaters and Thompson*, 196.

³³ Young, *The Trial of Bywaters and Thompson*, 138-139.

would read a book and imagine herself as the character in the book.”³⁴ Bywaters constantly proclaimed Thompson’s innocence, but the jury chose to ignore his pleas as well as the defense’s argument that Thompson’s letters merely displayed an overactive imagination. The jury believed the argument of the prosecution, which depended upon the idea that Edith Thompson’s indulgence in fiction led to fantasy; her easily influenced mind allowed this fantasy to become reality. Influenced by the aforementioned assumptions and science about female readers, the jury said Thompson was guilty because the prosecution successfully argued that Thompson’s references to poison in her letters, the product of fanciful reading, proved that she had conspired with and incited Bywaters to murder her husband. Edith Thompson, as a woman who read copious amounts of cheap fiction, was impressionable and emotional. Her unbalanced mind caused her to over-identify with the characters and allowed the perverse ideas present in her books to seep into her mind, encouraging lethal incitement and conspiracy.³⁵

What is not emphasized in the trial or in the press was that Freddy also read books; this fact was never divulged in the trial.³⁶ While Edith Thompson was seen as indulging in deadly fantasy due to her reading, Freddy Bywaters’s actions were never discussed as the consequences of his reading. While Thompson’s reading habits were discussed in great detail, the idea that Bywater’s reading could have inspired him to murder Percy Thompson was not examined because the notion of popular fiction as dangerous was most commonly associated with women. Even Justice Shearman’s language indicated the uneven contrast between Edith Thompson and her lover; he described Bywaters as having “good character,” and mentioned, “when the man (Bywaters) is making statements, they are always exculpating the woman.”³⁷ Justice Sherman then mentioned how Thompson claimed that she was innocent and Bywaters was guilty, making her out to be the greater villain for throwing her lover to the wolves.³⁸ The successful conviction of Edith Thompson for incitement symbolized a shift in blame; Thompson, the woman, was considered to bear the more responsibility than the person who actually stabbed the victim.

Present throughout the trial and its coverage was the idea that cheap fiction was dangerous, providing a fantasy world in which readers could escape. The greatest fear of all was that this sort of fiction could destroy social norms and boundaries, promoting ideals that were contrary to traditional conceptions of female docility and patriarchy. Cheap fiction was associated with the lower-middle classes; it was considered to be vulgar, worthless, and dangerous. These novels were especially affiliated with women; women were believed to be more emotional, as well as more likely to identify with fictional characters on a personal level. Edith Thompson was the personification of these assumptions and anxieties. She was a married woman living a fast-paced, childless existence, while engaging in an adulterous relationship that led to murder. The prosecution was able to successfully convince the jury that Thompson’s love of cheap, romantic fiction galvanized her into action, and that her lethal fantasies led to Percy Thompson’s death. The unifying theme is cheap fiction. Edith Thompson embodied the fear that cheap fiction, with its lower class and female associations, would help to precipitate the destruction of societal morals and norms. The severity of her punishment, her execution, is verification of the magnitude of these fears.

³⁴ Young, *The Trial of Bywaters and Thompson*, 97.

³⁵ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 639-640.

³⁶ Bland, “The Trials and Tribulations of Edith Thompson,” 639.

³⁷ Young, *The Trial of Bywaters and Thompson*, 180, 188.

³⁸ Young, *The Trial of Bywaters and Thompson*, 180.