

**SEX, UNNATURAL DEATH & PRESS PUBLICITY
IN 1790s WESTMINSTER:
ON & OFF THE CRIMINAL RECORD**

By Edmund M. Green & Penelope J. Corfield

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ESSAY:

Disastrously, an experimental sexual encounter in the City of Westminster in September 1791 turned out to be fatal for one protagonist.¹ The amorous pair were the Prague-born František Kocžwara, a composer of rousing battle music, and Susannah Hill, a Somerset-born prostitute of modest means. Their meeting ended in her trial for his murder.

This dramatic sequence of events is not generally known to social historians, although it has attracted the attention of experts on London's sexual economy.² And the legal intricacies of the consequential law case have also been recently explored.³ Yet the tale merits a full retelling, in order not only to place its context within the social/sexual topography of Westminster, but also to analyse the contrasting roles of the law and press publicity in bringing Susannah Hill to judgment – and keeping her case thereafter in the public eye.

Lawyers certainly accepted that an apparent malefactor should be brought for judgment before a court of law. However, they were equally concerned that the disreputable details of a dangerous sexual experiment be not publicly circulated. Their ethics of caution were partly prudential, to prevent risks to others – and partly dictated by a concern not to outrage conventional morality. For that reason, the published legal records, in the form of the *Old Bailey Sessions Papers* did not record Hill's trial.⁴ These sources, which constitute a truly magnificent resource for historians, have already been subjected to admirable scrutiny and critique.⁵ But it is worth adding one more reminder that a percentage of cases – usually relating to forbidden sexual practices – were at times summarised or (as happened in 1791) entirely excluded from the published records. Indeed, the *Old Bailey Sessions Papers*, which had long provided popular reading matter for the general public, were by the end of the eighteenth century losing

their primacy as purveyors of ‘true crime’ stories, while newspapers were eagerly picking up the baton.⁶

Journalists and commercial publishers ignored legal pleas for silence, as made in court. It was commercially attractive to purvey scandal, because such material was a sure-fire matter of interest to a great majority of their readers. As a result, Susannah Hill’s notoriety survives in the annals of history – not because she was an assumed prostitute but because of Kocżwara’s request for help with erotic asphyxiation.

The analysis which follows is based upon a variety of sources, including local records as well as legal and press reports. Particularly valuable is a little-known transcript of the court-room proceedings at Susannah Hill’s trial. In sequence, the discussion surveys: (1) the sexual economy of eighteenth-century Westminster; (2) sex and death in Susannah Hill’s Vine Street parlour; (3) Susannah Hill at the Old Bailey; and (4) sexual scandal and the press. Human interest in the endless permutations of sexuality was, of course, not new in this period. Yet the role of press publicity in circulating, embellishing, and recording for posterity the latest scandal was becoming a notable feature of what one commentator in 1791 sardonically but presciently defined as ‘modern propensities’.

I: The Sexual Economy of Eighteenth-Century Westminster

The area of Westminster between the Strand, Covent Garden and Soho was the chief location in metropolitan London for a dazzling array of commercial sexual services. These businesses contributed to the ‘low-life’ economy that was the raffish counterpart to the respectable commercial, professional and political world of the City of Westminster.⁷ As eighteenth-century commentators never tired of stressing, the sprawling metropolis was an urban home for vice as well as virtue.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the West End was a conspicuous and strikingly successful example of a leisure town. It greatly outranked all the provincial spa towns, such as Bath, Brighton, Scarborough and Tunbridge Wells, which provided similar services but on a smaller scale.⁸ Drawn by London's annual winter social season, the leisured class flocked there to spend money which had often been made elsewhere. Shop windows displayed the latest fashions. In 1786 the German visitor Sophie von la Roche gushed about the modish commercial outlets of 'lovely Oxford Street'.⁹ Three licensed theatres, in Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket, put on serious drama and opera, while other places staged lighter works. These fashionable West End venues were noted gathering places where prostitutes sought clients, and, sometimes more discreetly, *vice versa*.

Meanwhile, between and behind the principal thoroughfares were hidden meaner alleys and courts, the location of equally hidden economic, social, and sexual activities.¹⁰ 'If you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city' declared Dr Johnson 'you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts'.¹¹ It was a perceptive dictum from an inveterate Londoner.

Among the many specialist services on offer were sexual encounters, catering for all tastes and budgets.¹² Most providers were female prostitutes. Their lifestyles, which flouted conventional morality, were grudgingly semi-tolerated. Meanwhile, networks of establishments and individuals also catered for men wishing to pay for same-sex sexual services. Their world, which was accessible for those 'in the know', tended to be more secretive, in order to avoid stringent legal penalties.¹³ But all providers of sexual services had to balance the need to find clients with sufficient discretion to avoid falling foul the authorities.

Total numbers of London's female prostitutes in the eighteenth century are not easy to calculate. Their businesses were not acknowledged in standard occupational listings. And there were problems of definition too. There was a core of full-time prostitutes, and a peripheral population (probably greater in aggregate) for whom prostitution was an occasional activity. One distinction, which was commonly made, contrasted a high-class *St James's Beauty*, from a location associated with polite society and the royal court, with her low-life counterpart, a *St Giles's Beauty*, linked instead to London's most notorious rookery.¹⁴ But there were countless intermediate gradations. One account in 1758 estimated that London had 62,500 prostitutes. These were sorted, semi-jovially, into a range of categories from 'high' to 'low':

Women of fashion who intrigue; demi-reps [women-about-town with dubious reputations]; good-natured girls; kept mistresses; ladies of pleasure; whores; park-walkers; street-walkers; bunters [rag-pickers]; [and] bulk-mongers [homeless prostitutes who solicited from benches before shop fronts].¹⁵

Furthermore, in the 1790s, the magistrate Patrick Colquhoun made a conscious attempt at precise calculation. He therefore suggested that London contained some 2,000 prostitutes from the class of well-educated women; plus 3,000 more ranking above the most menial servants; and a further 20,000 who 'may have been employed as menial servants, or seduced in very early life ... who live wholly by prostitution'. Added to that tally of 25,000, he then surmised that another 25,000 'live partly by prostitution, including the multitudes of low females, who cohabit with labourers and others without matrimony'.¹⁶ Colquhoun's rounded totals have been rightly criticised; and they remain untestable. Yet they at least suggested the great variety of lifestyles involved.

Prostitutes working indoors generally charged higher fees per transaction than did those walking the streets; but indoor practitioners also had higher overhead costs. Outdoor sexual encounters were typically more casual and much cheaper. In 1762, the diarist James Boswell commented on the range of available partners: from ‘the splendid Madam at fifty guineas a night, down to the civil nymph with white-thread stockings who tramps along the Strand and will resign her engaging person to your honour for a pint of wine and a shilling’.¹⁷ He himself had a penchant for *al fresco* sex; and engaged with street walkers for 6d or 1s.¹⁸ True, Boswell was careful with his money. But the suggestion from historian Dan Cruickshank that a ‘typical’ sexual transaction in London might cost up to two guineas, seems far too high.¹⁹ (Much depends upon definitions of ‘typical’). Meanwhile, those at the ‘lowest’ end of the sexual range charged a pittance. So when the veteran reformer Francis Place recalled the Westminster of his youth in the later eighteenth century, he instanced ‘drunken filthy young prostitutes’ in the Privy Gardens by Charing Cross who charged no more than twopence.²⁰

During these years, London was also developing an array of specialist services, catering for all sorts of sexual problems and proclivities. Many ‘quack’ doctors in particular provided otherwise unavailable treatments, at otherwise unaffordable prices, with an otherwise unattainable anonymity.²¹ Particularly in demand were so-called ‘cures’ for sexually transmitted diseases. Hence eighteenth-century newspapers were replete with small advertisements from ‘clap doctors’ and ‘pox doctors’. All promised discretion in cases that were widespread, secret, and shameful.²²

Women, both reputable and disreputable, were also advised on how to get pregnant;²³ or how to avoid that outcome. Herbal abortifacients were canvassed, as were pills to relieve ‘female obstruction’.²⁴

Troublesome among the conditions afflicting some male lovers was the experience of sexual impotence.²⁵ It was a theme that lent itself readily to prurient innuendo. Thus, during the Westminster election campaign in 1784, a satirical print was given the sly title of ‘The Devonshire Method to Restore a Lost Member’. It revealed Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, in an apothecary’s shop, surveying the medicinal pills and potions, whilst seeking to boost the fortunes of her favoured election candidate, the Whig politician Charles James Fox.²⁶

Various suggested treatments, both old and new, were much touted. One potential stimulant was the practice of amorous flagellation. Long – and apocryphally – reported to be a personal ‘vice’ that was especially enjoyed by Englishmen, this service was certainly on commercial offer in eighteenth-century London.²⁷ Hence a satirist like William Hogarth used the motif of a bundle of birch twigs to signify a prostitute’s lodging-house – as in his *Harlot’s Progress*, Plate 3 (1731).²⁸

And there was one further detectable, though rarely discussed, mechanism. Crowds, who flocked regularly to Tyburn to witness public executions, might note that some male criminals, while being hung, displayed signs of both incontinence and seminal emissions. Such sights might encourage onlookers to infer a causal link between hanging and sexual stimulation. Certainly, eminent physicians in the early nineteenth century, like Sir Astley Cooper (1768-1841) and Sir Benjamin Brodie (1783-1862), were documenting cases of sudden spinal breaks or trauma which prompted a state of priapism (continuous erections).²⁹ And this era was, after all, the one in which the Marquis de Sade was inspired to pen his various versions of *Justine* (1791), although neither his notorious name nor his writings were yet known in Britain.

Historically, the number of men who experimented on their own account with techniques of suspension in order to achieve arousal remains

unknown. The method later became known as erotic asphyxiation. When it worked, it did so by temporarily cutting off the supply of oxygen to the brain, causing sensations of dizziness – followed by an exhilarating rush of dopamine and endorphins.³⁰ The effects were both physiological and psychological. Yet the technique was not always successful – and remained intrinsically risky. As a result, its use remains shrouded in secrecy. Only cases which ended in death came to official attention. The first recorded in Britain was the 1718 demise of the Huguenot refugee, Peter Anthony Motteux (1663-1718). He was an author, who had translated Cervantes' *Don Quixote* into English.³¹ But Motteux was not the first to experiment with erotic asphyxiation – nor the last.

2: Sex & Death in Susannah Hill's Vine Street Parlour

One attempt at triggering sexual pleasure in this way led to the fatal encounter between František Koczwara, a musician and composer, originally from Prague,³² and Susannah Hill. She lived in Vine Street in St Martin's parish (not to be confused with another, more respectable Vine Street in nearby St James's parish). This small alley was just north of the Strand, to which it was almost parallel, as shown in Fig.1.³³ In other words, its location within a few minutes' walk from Covent Garden, Charing Cross and London's theatreland, was ideal for Hill's purposes.

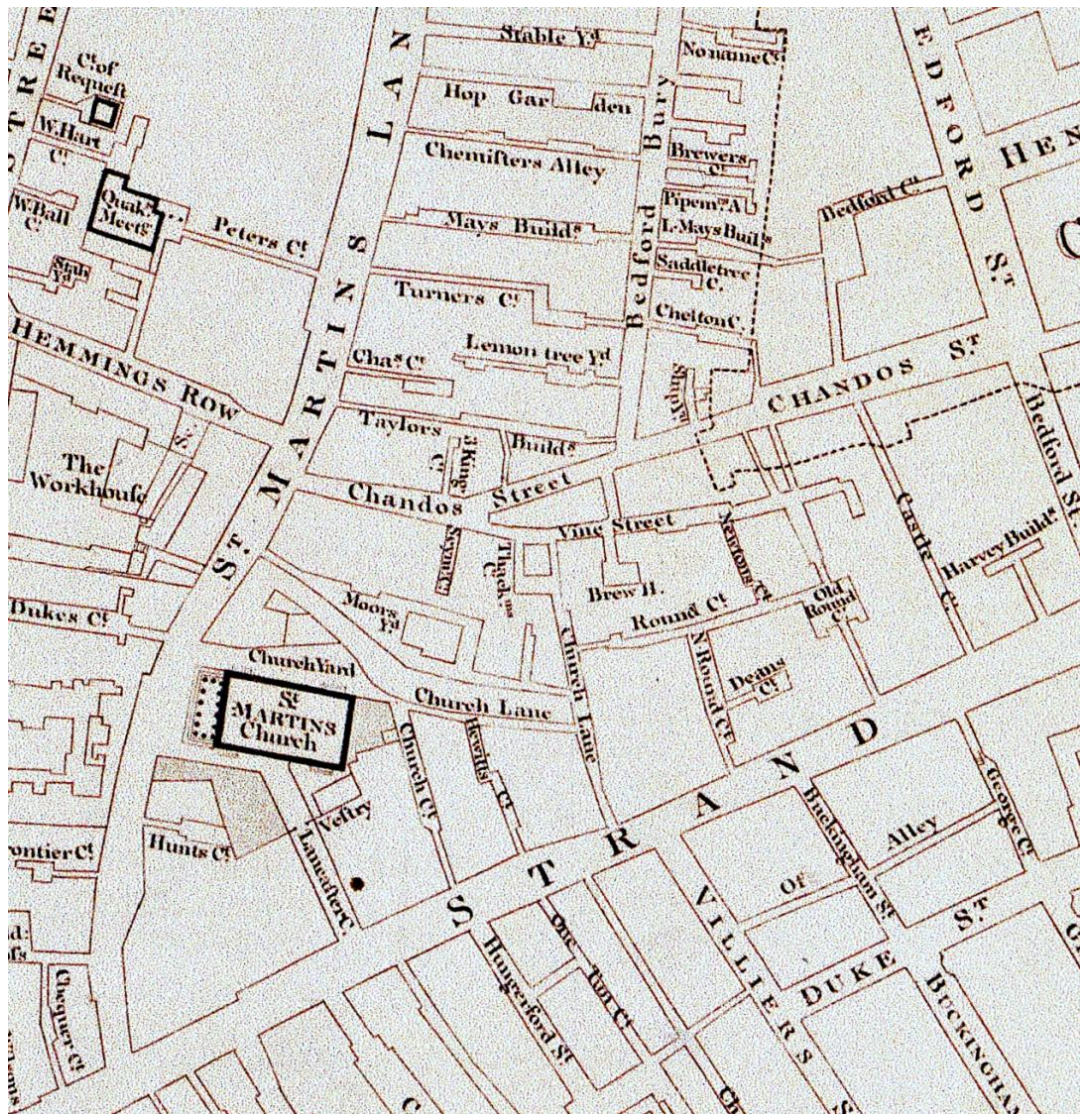


FIG.1 Detail from
 E. Waters, *Plan of the Parish of St Martin-in-the Fields* (1799),
 showing Vine Street (centre),
 amongst a maze of small streets and courts
 between Chandos Street and the Strand.
 The North/South axis lies along line of St Martin's Lane (L)
 Scale 1: 3,000
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However, while Vine Street was dark and narrow, it was also discreet. Raffish visitors could, if they wished, slip swiftly and discreetly into its knot of small courts and alleyways. (In the later 1820s, this whole area between Chandos Street and the Strand was redeveloped as King William Street and the first Charing Cross Hospital).

Vine Street had an exceptionally high population turnover, even in an era when towns were known for the frequent mobility of their residents. The Westminster poll books show that in 1784 Vine Street housed 20 male voters. By occupation, they comprised three shoemakers, three chandlers, two victuallers, two slaters, two hairdressers, and one each of the following: a bedstead-maker, bottle-seller, brewer, cabinet-maker, carpenter, labourer, milkman, and tailor. Only four years later, however, only one of them voted in the 1788 by-election. He was Oliver Davis, the brewer. New voters included four (different) shoemakers; and three (different) chandlers. The turnover then somewhat diminished: and at the next election in 1790 six voters from 1788 remained to cast their votes. Collectively, all these men typified Westminster's economy of small artisans, traders, and service workers.

Their neighbourhood was also home in 1791 to Susannah Hill, who found herself on trial for murder. Like so many people in London, she was not born in the metropolis.³⁴ She had allegedly spent her childhood in Frome (Somerset), where she was born perhaps in the early 1760s.³⁵ At the time of her trial, Hill was said to be aged 29, making her rather older than many prostitutes who appear in the legal records.³⁶ And she was by then sufficiently established to rent her own lodgings.

In person, Hill was described as 'neatly dressed in common apparel', when she appeared at the Old Bailey, a fortnight after the fatal encounter with Kocżwara. And – to the apparent disappointment of the reporter – she looked neither greatly depraved nor particularly attractive.³⁷

Two main versions of Hill's sexual history survive, both beginning with her Somerset childhood. Neither can be independently verified; but the first is probably the more reliable, being based on her initial testimony before the magistrate. In this version, she left Somerset for London in the early 1780s, and worked in domestic service. Sometime later she was

persuaded by a young man named Fenton to leave her job and to live with him in King Street, near Drury Lane. She bore him three children, before he deserted her.³⁸ Early in 1791 she took lodgings at 5 Vine Street, comprising a front parlour on the ground floor, with a view out into the street, together with an adjoining back room.³⁹

A second, somewhat more elaborate, story follows the trope of Hogarth's classic *Harlot's Progress*. It tells of a simple country girl who comes to town, is inveigled into prostitution, rises to become the mistress of a wealthy merchant, but is ultimately reduced to ruin. In this second version, Hill remained in Somerset for some years. With a limited education, she was destined for a life of domestic service until she entered into a relationship, aged 19, with a local farmer's son. She bore him two children, one dying shortly after birth, the other stillborn. Her lover left for London, promising (as standard) to send money. Yet no help was forthcoming. Susannah Hill then followed him to London. Poor and friendless, she became the mistress of an older man; but, when their liaison ended, she resorted to prostitution.⁴⁰ For three years she supported herself by street-walking, before taking rooms in Vine Street early in 1791. So both versions led her to the same location.

Like Susannah Hill, František Koczwara was a migrant to London, probably arriving in the mid-1770s. He was older than her, although his exact age is unknown: at his death, he may have been in his early 40s. His name was Bohemian but its spelling was mangled by the London newspapers into anything from Francis Cosworth to František Koczwara – the latter becoming the preferred spelling in standard biographies. The newspapers described him as German, which probably reflected the fact that Prague's social elite in this era spoke German. Koczwara had led a peripatetic life, staying in Bath, Dublin, and Rochester as well as London. He himself played many stringed instruments, including not only the

violin but also the viola, the cittern [a zither-like guitar], the cello, and the double bass. And he composed light chamber music.

Koczwara's greatest contribution to European musical history was the popularisation of battle music. It was a minority genre, which dated back to the early sixteenth-century Renaissance. And it produced one masterpiece, which remains in the mainstream repertoire, in the form of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (1880). (Beethoven's *Wellingtons Sieg: oder die Schlacht bei Vittoria/ Wellington's Victory: or the Battle of Vittoria* (1813) would surely have disappeared had it been by anyone other than Beethoven.)

Within this tradition, Koczwara's programme sonata *The Battle of Prague* for piano, cello, and violin was a musical evocation of the Prussian victory over Austria on 6 May 1757.⁴¹ His sonata was published in 1788, when he was living in Dublin. Its success helped to popularise the genre.⁴² And in 1791 Koczwara was summoned from Dublin by the impresario 'Sir' John Gallini to play in the orchestra of the newly-reopened King's Theatre in the Haymarket, then London's leading opera house. Koczwara certainly played in the Concerts of Ancient Music. And he participated in the Handel commemoration in May 1791. Meanwhile, he also taught music either at his pupils' homes or at his lodgings at 35 Berwick Street, Westminster – some 15 minutes' walk from Vine Street.

Specifically, then, the lives of Susannah Hill and František Koczwara collided on Friday 2 September 1791. Between one and two o'clock that afternoon he was walking along Vine Street, when he saw Hill at a window. It was later suggested that she had beckoned to him. At any rate, her door was open and Koczwara entered.⁴³ Her front parlour was untidy, its table bestrewn with crockery, suggesting that she was not expecting visitors. By way of introduction, he sat down and asked Hill if she would have anything to drink. (A standard opening gambit). Hill

expressed a preference for porter while Kocżwara chose brandy-and-water. Accordingly, he gave her some money for drinks, together with two shillings for some ham and beef. The total was five shillings – a relatively lavish expenditure, probably including a fee for promised sexual favours. Hill promptly visited a licensed victualler in Vine Street, returning with food and drink, which she and Kocżwara shared.

After these preliminaries, they retired to the back room where ‘several acts of the grossest indecency passed between them’. But his desire had evaporated. These details came from statements (no longer extant in the original) made by Susannah Hill, either at the inquest or before the magistrates. She declared that she had tried to ‘raise his penis’, but without success. Kocżwara then ‘made some proposals that even shocked her’. He opened his shirt to reveal red scars on his chest and belly which he said ‘were the marks of cuts which women had made at different times, by his desire’.⁴⁴ He then ‘desired she would cut off his penis, he desired to have it severed for which service he offered her a guinea’.

Such requests indicated that Kocżwara derived sexual enjoyment from undergoing considerable amounts of pain, a condition later known as masochism.⁴⁵ Hill, however, declined to oblige. ‘He then told her that he would like to be hanged up for about five minutes as that hanging would do everything that he wished for, it would raise his letch [craving]⁴⁶ or lust’, as Hill reportedly declared.⁴⁷

So Kocżwara gave her one shilling to buy a rope. Again Hill left the premises but she was unable to find a hempen rope of the requisite thickness. Instead, she returned with two thinner hempen cords, valued at one penny. They had evidently developed some element of trust. Kocżwara had presumably made some payment before they retired to the back room. But he was then happy for her to leave the premises, with the

money. Equally, she left Kocżwara alone in her apartment on two occasions while she went out to get supplies.

Then disaster followed. Kocżwara took the two hempen cords and ‘put them round his neck and tied himself up to the back parlour door’, looping them onto a staple on the door-post. A staple was an iron rod or bar, used to secure the door from the inside. Another report stated that he used the door knob, as shown in Fig.2. Yet a flimsy handle would have been less sturdy for the task than an iron staple.⁴⁸



FIG.2
Frontispiece from
Anon.,
*Modern
Propensities:
Or, an Essay
on the Art of
Strangling, ...
With Memoirs of
Susannah Hill
and a Summary
of her Trial* (1791).
The protagonists’
clothing and
demeanours are
surely implausible
but the image
depicts both
an intimate boudoir
and suggestive
details of the
dangerous
‘art of strangling’.
The birch twig
broom on
the floor [front R]
also symbolised the
stock-in-trade
of a prostitute.

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Ref: 1414 f.32,
frontispiece.

According to Hill's testimony, Kocżwara had given her an additional guinea to pull the knot tight, and then to cut him down after five minutes. The staple was little more than four feet above the ground. So the only way by which Kocżwara could suspend himself was by falling to his knees. His feet fell from under him and he dangled, gasping for breath. Hill asked if he would like to be released, but (according to one report) he indicated that he wished to remain a little longer.⁴⁹

Once five minutes had elapsed, Hill cut him down. Kocżwara slumped forward and sustained injuries to his face. But he emitted no cry of pain, for he was already insensible. According to one account, Hill washed his face with porter in an attempt to revive him, but to no avail.

Susannah Hill then sought help. Elizabeth Dawkins, wife of John Dawkins, a plane-maker of 13 Vine Street, stated that Hill raised the window and called 'in a very great fright'.⁵⁰ Crossing to Hill's lodgings, Elizabeth Dawkins reported Hill to have exclaimed: 'I have hanged a man and I am afraid he is dead'. Those words, which contained the core of the case against Susannah Hill, were so incriminating that, when questioned, Dawkins was asked to confirm them, which she did. Further assistance was summoned from a nearby public house in Vine Street. A surgeon, probably the Mr Harding who later made a statement to the magistrate, arrived and opened a vein. Some blood flowed; but the end was near. Shortly afterwards, the surgeon pronounced Kocżwara to be dead.

Hereupon the law intervened.⁵¹ Samuel Blacklow, the constable of St Martin-in-the-Fields, took Susannah Hill into custody at the St Martin's watch house. This venue was already infamous, as an overcrowded single-room lockup into which the nightly trawl of street-walkers was dumped.⁵² However, Hill was spared a long stay there. At six o'clock that evening she was taken to the magistrates' office, at nearby 4 Bow Street.⁵³ Here Edward Lavender, the duty officer, heard her

statement and made notes. She was also examined closely by William Addington, the magistrate. An account, which clearly derived from his examination (differing only in a few minor points from other reports), appeared promptly in the *Morning Post*.⁵⁴

Evidence was given that Kocżwara had a penchant for being abused and treated roughly by prostitutes:

A young man said that the fruit-woman who sits at Johnson's Court, Charing Cross,⁵⁵ told him that the deceased had been there, among the numbers of prostitutes who reside in that celebrated place, and had offered any of them two guineas to cut off his ears, but none of them would oblige him. One of them, however, ran a penknife through his ear and, by his desire, many of them tied his legs together, and rolled him in the kennel [central gutter] of the court.

Some other prostitutes from the Charing Cross area also testified that they knew Kocżwara. They confirmed his interest in rough foreplay.⁵⁶ 'It was stated that it was his peculiar passion to be treated with violence and harshness by the unfortunate women whom he visited, and that he had showed the prisoner many scars upon his body, which, he said, at his desire, had been inflicted by females'.⁵⁷ In these circumstances, the examining magistrate William Addington expressed doubt as to whether Susannah Hill had actually murdered Kocżwara. Indeed, given the significance of 'reputation' in cases of this nature, the prior sexual notoriety of the deceased probably worked in favour of the woman whom he had involved in this fatal misadventure.

Nonetheless, a man had died, in highly suspicious circumstances. Hill was held in custody overnight, pending further examination by the magistrate the following morning and an inquest before the Westminster coroner in the afternoon.

Unlike the county coroners of Middlesex, who were elected by the county freeholders, the Westminster coroner was appointed by the Dean

and Chapter of Westminster Abbey, since St Martin-in-the-Fields parish came under the jurisdiction of the Liberty of Westminster. The coroner's first action was to empanel 24 male householders from the locality to view the body at Hill's lodgings and to determine the deceased's identity. The jurors were chosen from lists of respectable local householders, and required to attend as their (unpaid) civic duty.

Chosen for this case were: five victuallers (William Brown of the Strand; William Humphries of Chandos Street; William Morris of Bull Inn Court; John Malcolm of Vine Street; George Webb of Bedford Street); four urban gentlemen (Mr Knowles and Mr Thomas Sambridge, both of Salisbury Street; Mr Thorley [no address]; and William Willey of Charles Court); two brokers (Edward Hayles of Bedfordbury; Samuel Sheldon of Round Court); two cooks (John Boywell of Chandos Street; John Brown of Round Court); and one each of the following occupations: baker (John Warnick of Round Court); cheesemonger (William Payne of Church Court); cordwainer (James Sheriff of Chandos Street); furrier (George Poland of the Strand); grinder (John Tindal of Hewit's Court); grocer (William Wintersfield of Bull Inn Court); haberdasher (George Firkins [no address]); hairdresser (William Burton of Chandos Street); hatter (Charles Corney of Chandos Street); tallow chandler (Peter Vincent of Chandos Street); and wine merchant (Benjamin Capper of the Strand). All were respectable citizens; all from the immediate vicinity; and almost half their number (11) engaged in trades relating to food and drink.

Inquests were traditionally held in a public house or similar venue close to the site of a death or discovery of a body. So the following afternoon, on Saturday 3 September 1791, Thomas Prichard, the Westminster coroner, convened the inquest on Kocżwara at the *Carpenter's Arms* in Vine Street.⁵⁸ Detailed minutes have not survived. The full account in *Morning Post*, 3 September 1791, preceded the

inquest and therefore, as already noted, must have come from the prior examination of Hill by William Addington at Bow Street.

Having started at four o'clock, it was past midnight when the inquest jury finally returned a verdict. They considered Hill to have committed wilful murder. She was at once returned to custody in Clerkenwell's New Prison, pending a criminal trial. While lesser charges would have needed a further filter by going before a Middlesex Grand Jury, this procedure did not apply to charges as serious as murder. Consequently the trial of *Rex v. Hill* was immediately listed at the Old Bailey. Meanwhile, Kocżwara's corpse was taken by friends to an undertaker in Hungerford Market in preparation for burial.

3: Susannah Hill at the Old Bailey

Key witnesses were at once summoned to appear at the Old Bailey. They included: Samuel Blacklow, the constable of St Martin-in-the-Fields who had taken Hill into custody; Edward Lavender, the Bow Street clerk who heard Hill's first testimony; as well as George Harding; William Curtis; John Malcolm, the licensee of the *Carpenter's Arms* in Vine Street, who had summoned the surgeon; Elizabeth Dawkins who lived opposite Hill; and Edward Duggan, a chandler of Vine Street (a Westminster voter) and his wife Sarah.

With their help, the Bow Street officers were prepared to make their case. There were, however, several elements which were not entirely clear. In particular, Edward Lavender, the Bow Street office clerk, was the first of many to be unsure how the fatal rope was attached to the door.

Hill's trial for murder opened promptly on Friday 16 September, just two weeks after the death. According to the indictment, Susannah Hill

Did make an assault and a small hempen cord ... which she in both her hands had and held about the neck of ... Francis Kotzwara [sic] feloniously, wilfully, and of her malice aforethought did put, affix, and fasten ... Francis Kotzwara [sic] with the hempen cord ... did tie up, affix, and fasten to a certain iron staple of the door post, and did hang, choke, strangle, and suffocate him of which ... [he] then and there instantly died ... and feloniously and wilfully and of her malice aforethought did kill and murder [him].⁵⁹

Opening the case for the Crown was the celebrated legal figure of William Garrow (1760-1840).⁶⁰ Although his greatest historical fame was achieved by his efforts as a defence lawyer,⁶¹ Garrow was active in the 1790s as a prosecutor. He appeared for the Crown in the celebrated treason trials of Thomas Hardy and John Horne Tooke.⁶² Called to the Bar in 1783, Garrow had as a young man participated in the coterie around the avowedly reform-minded Whig leader Charles James Fox.⁶³ In the aftermath of the French Revolution, however, Garrow followed Edmund Burke in switching to support the prime minister, Pitt the Younger. Garrow's changeover then led to an illustrious career. He became King's Counsel in 1793; Solicitor General in 1812, when he received the knighthood that went with the job; and, soon afterwards, Attorney General in 1813.⁶⁴ In addition, he served as an MP from 1805-7 and again from 1812-17. But he was not a primarily a politician; and his speeches in the House were lacklustre.

Yet Garrow in 1791 was on his home terrain. When Hill's case came to Court on Friday 16 September, he immediately sought to clear women and young people from the public galleries. He considered them to be 'improper auditors' of such scandalous material. And before launching the prosecution case, he warned that: 'The communication publicly of this filthy story cannot be beneficial to society.'⁶⁵

That attitude explains official concerns about the dangers that might arise from the sexually explicit details in *Rex v. Hill* and other similar cases. Garrow specifically alluded to the 1785 trial of Roger Sweetman for sodomy with Henry Sansum.⁶⁶ Sodomy was always a difficult charge to prove, requiring evidence of both penetration and ejaculation. That case had therefore required the presentation of controversial material. Immediately afterwards, however, the prosecuting lawyer's own notes, as well as those of the court's shorthand writer, were collected and burned. The aim was to ensure that 'the records even of a public court of justice might not be contaminated with such a subject'.⁶⁷

But, in this particular case, Sweetman was not freed after his acquittal. Instead, he was charged with assault with intent to commit sodomy. And, when convicted, he was sentenced to be publicly whipped twice 'with proper severity' and to three years' imprisonment in Newgate.⁶⁸ However, Sweetman's first trial was not included in the Old published reports. And there were other similar examples. In 1789 the trial of Alexander Leith and John Drew, which ended in acquittals for both, was also excluded.⁶⁹ Sodomy was deemed to be a 'horrible crime, not to be mentioned among Christians'. Officialdom accordingly took the view that the less reported publicly about such matters, the better the chance of suppressing sexual 'deviance'. Hence the total number of sodomy trials in eighteenth-century London remains opaque.⁷⁰

Public interest in the case of Susannah Hill had no doubt been sharpened by newspaper reports of the inquest. A considerable crowd accordingly remained, even after women and young people had been requested to leave. But all present were given an instant caution. Garrow indicated that: 'the most profound silence is the best course of action they can take, to do no mischief'.⁷¹ He also appealed to the press to observe 'a perfect silence' on the evidence before the Court.⁷² In particular,

Kocżwara's impotence was a delicate issue around which Garrow skirted. 'There are in society', he declared, 'unfortunate and miserable men with a desire to accomplish those acts (which in the vigour of nature men may accomplish) after the means of effecting those acts have subsided, and when the passions ought to have ceased'.⁷³ Such circumlocutions indicated that Garrow expected his listeners to comprehend his meaning, while he refrained, almost superstitiously, from being explicit.

Proceedings, however, then came to a rapid halt. The question of Susannah Hill's guilt was never sent for consideration by the jury. Legal precision prevailed. The charge against Hill was wilful murder; and, for that, the evidence was insufficient. Mr Justice Gould asked whether any third party, who could have provided further information, had been present at the scene of the crime. But, since there was no other witness, the judge threw out the case forthwith. As instructed, the jury returned a verdict of 'not guilty', leaving Hill a free woman. 'On her dismissal, signs of excessive joy were visible', as well they might be.⁷⁴

Legally, it was unlikely, upon the available evidence, that Hill would be convicted of wilful murder. William Addington had from the start expressed doubts on that matter. Similar suggestions were made in some newspapers. Garrow too concurred that Hill might have been indicted on the wrong charge: 'my humble opinion is that the crime of the prisoner ... will not amount to murder, but that it will amount only to the lesser crime of manslaughter.'⁷⁵ The staple to which the noose was tied was only four feet above the ground, and Kocżwara was unable to suspend himself without falling to his knees. His consent to the procedure was obvious. Moreover, insofar as Susannah Hill was involved, the intention of the hanging was not to kill Kocżwara, but to stimulate him sexually. Had she been charged with manslaughter or homicide, without wilful malice aforethought, then the outcome might have been very different.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, when Hill's case first came before her close neighbours on the coroner's jury, they viewed her actions as murderous. They may have experienced a 'moral panic', signifying their heightened alarm that society was collapsing morally.⁷⁷ Certainly, the *Morning Chronicle* considered that: 'the coroner and jury ... with a view ... of deterring worthless women from becoming the instruments of propensities something worse than insanity ... returned it wilful murder'.⁷⁸ Since Kocżwara was beyond the reach of worldly punishment, Hill made a suitable alternative scapegoat. Further finger-wagging continued in the Old Bailey, where Garrow argued that 'it would be for the benefit of society that these miserable women should be taught that practices like this ... are too dangerous to be repeated, and it should be extremely unfit that they should be taught by her example'.⁷⁹

Historian Julie Peakman considers that the case was brought to court as a deterrent.⁸⁰ And Garrow did indeed express the hope 'that by holding forth a severe example it might deter the depraved part of mankind from seeking indecent stimulatives, to pervert the ordinary course of nature, that it might also deter the abandoned part of the female sex from lending themselves for hire, for purposes so vile, so unnatural, and so detestable'.⁸¹ However, rhetorical expressions of dismay did not amount to definitive evidence. The law brought precise charges and sought precise evidence. And, as already noted, Garrow was one of many who questioned whether the murder charge was appropriate.

Criminal trials were, during these years, coming to be conducted in a fully adversarial format, with rival speeches for the prosecution and defence.⁸² The fluent Garrow was a key exponent of expert pleading. Hill on the other hand had no legal representation. In this period, defendants were expected to pay for their own lawyers. But manifestly she was not able to afford the luxury of a professional defence. Even without expert

pleading on her behalf, however, Hill did not encounter a vengeful legal system. Far from seeking to make a public example of her, the case was dismissed by the judge without being put to the jury.

Most deaths by erotic asphyxiation occur when the victim is alone. In this case, Kocżwara was decidedly unlucky. He had ensured the company of a witness but she was unable to save him. Perhaps a thicker rope might not have made so tight a ligature around his neck. It was possible that Susannah Hill was an expert in assisting in such cases. After all, Garrow did tell the jury that:

after the transaction ... [Hill] did not conduct herself like a woman conscious of the crime of wilful murder, but like a person too much habituated to such scenes. She went to a neighbour's and talked to them ... as a matter of everyday experience. She said in a careless manner that she had hanged a man and was afraid that she had hanged him for too long.⁸³

However, Hill had no suitable rope immediately to hand. Her flustered comments after Kocżwara's death did not amount to statements on oath. And subsequent assessments of her style of speaking were clearly speculative and inconclusive.

Overall, therefore, the legal position was clear. With or without prior experience of such techniques, Hill had not refused her client's request for assistance with erotic strangulation; and she had not reacted fast enough to override her client's instructions when things went wrong. However, such behaviour did not amount to wilful murder. Thus Kocżwara had indeed died. Hill, however, had not murdered him.

4: Sexual Scandal & the Press

Press attention was, however, another matter. The lifestyles of prostitutes were already a matter of much literary exploration and satirical commentary.⁸⁴ And Susannah Hill's story was too good for the press to

ignore. Some of the way she was represented in print seems to have stemmed from characteristic tropes relating to eighteenth-century prostitution. So the frontispiece to the anonymously authored *Modern Propensities* (1791) (above Fig.2, p. 14) included a birch rod on the floor of Hill's room. Given that, as already noted, playful flagellation was an appreciated aid to eighteenth-century love-making, this image was a stylised way of indicating a prostitute's workplace.

Undoubtedly, Hill's rooms were located in an area of London that was known for the commercial sale of sex. Moreover, she was seen in her front parlour, with the front door open 'as usual'. Thus, even though Hill had no prior police record and was acquitted of murder, her encounter with Kocżwara made her a prime target for press commentary. The scandalous details fitted readily into an already flourishing sub-genre of courtroom reporting, which focused upon erotica.⁸⁵

Garrow's plea for an embargo on reporting the story was thus ignored. As already noted, the Old Bailey's shorthand writer was told to destroy his notes; and did so in front of everyone.⁸⁶ Yet at least one other reporter was on the case. The next morning, newspaper advertisements offered *Modern Propensities*, a pamphlet account of Hill's life and trial, fresh from the press for one shilling.⁸⁷

Moreover, London scoops were quickly recycled in the provincial press. Pre-trial accounts appeared in the *Chester Chronicle*, *Northampton Mercury*, *Bath Chronicle*, *Stamford Mercury*, and *Reading Mercury*.⁸⁸ And, again despite Garrow's pleas, the trial itself was reported in the *Morning Post*, and then recycled in the *Northampton Mercury* and *Reading Mercury*.⁸⁹ It is also possible that other references will be identified with further research. Eighteenth-century journalists regularly borrowed material, without acknowledgement, from each other's columns – and stories were routinely circulated and recirculated.

Commercial imperatives prevailed. Not only could readers be diverted by other people's sexual misadventures but those in need could also be offered help. The publication of *Modern Propensities* was a case in point. This work was probably written by an energetic quack doctor, named Martin Van Butchell,⁹⁰ styled as a gentleman in the Westminster poll book of 1788. He was an astute self-publicist.⁹¹ His medical practice already dealt with embarrassing conditions from anal fistula to impotence. And *Modern Propensities* pointedly enquired how 'elderly and antiquated Peers and Commons' would manage to 'satisfy the desires of female youth and vigour'? The text's bluff and jocular style sought to overcome any unease at answering such questions explicitly. Various options for achieving male arousal were reviewed in turn, including flagellation and strangulation. And finally readers were informed about a 'great, wonderful, and astonishing Nostrum ... known by the name of Van Butchell's Balsam of Life.'⁹² In effect, one man's disaster was being used as another's commercial opportunity.

Continuing the scandal-mongering, the *Bon-Ton Magazine*, which specialised in reporting sexual crimes, realised that there was still a market for the Susannah Hill story. In 1792-3, it recycled material from *Modern Propensities* in four distinct instalments, dealing with 'The effects of temporary strangulation on the human body'.⁹³

Consequently (to repeat), the published *Old Bailey Proceedings* do not provide full details of the total number of crimes which appeared before the court. Its invaluable records need to be supplemented by the unsystematic but expressive output of the printing press.

No evidence survives to tell historians precisely what individual readers made of 'true-crime' stories like that of Susannah Hill. Research has shown that at least a proportion of eighteenth-century press stories were received with a mix of suspicion and criticism.⁹⁴ But there were no

doubt others who took many things on trust. Collectively, journalists and publicists achieved their impact by offering an unstoppable cascade of news and views for an insatiable public. Strict accuracy was less important than active currency. (The same points apply, multiplied one thousand-fold, to social media today).

Considered by the world as a socially marginal figure in her own day, Susannah Hill hovered on and off the criminal record. After 1791, she disappeared again from recorded history. Yet she and her luckless sexual partner František Koczwara still have a shared afterlife in the annals of history. Press publicity and human love of scandal have outlasted all the legal niceties. Modern propensities indeed!

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ The authors express warm appreciation to: Jack Eckert at Harvard University's Countway Library of Medicine for help with sources; to Dr Nicole Hrouda, for encouragement and advice; to Tavez Aymer for technical assistance; and also to Tony Belton, Bob Shoemaker, and two anonymous referees, for critical readings. *Disclosure statement*: No financial interest or benefit accrues to the authors from the research underlying this essay or its web-publication.
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