

# The Death of Doc Harlan:

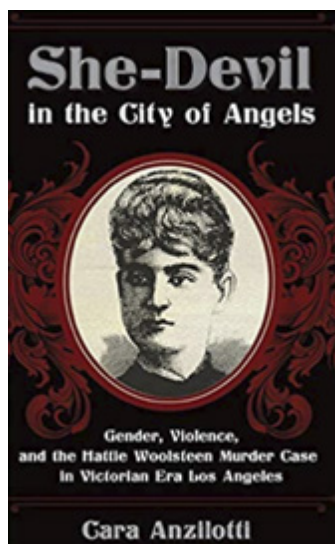
SEX, LIES, VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN VICTORIAN ERA LOS ANGELES

BY CARA ANZILOTTI\*

IN OCTOBER, 1887, Los Angeles dentist Charles Harlan went missing. His body was found in a burned-out barn in the nearby community of Compton. He had been bludgeoned, stabbed, shot in the head and set on fire. The prime suspect was a 21-year-old woman named Hattie Woolsteen, with whom it was rumored the married Harlan had been having an affair. Hattie soon found herself facing a murder charge as well as public scorn and outrage. She was dubbed “Wicked Woolsteen,” the “fiendish murderess” and a “she-devil.” The crime and Hattie’s subsequent trial captivated the public as few incidents had before. The fact that Charles Harlan ended up dead was not particularly noteworthy. It was the identity of his assailant that caused consternation, and that had everything to do with Victorian notions of class, gender, and sexuality.

During the nineteenth century it was considered a settled fact that gender roles were fixed, immutable, and that nature had endowed men and women with completely distinct yet complementary character traits. One’s gender, it was held, determined one’s character. Men were independent, assertive, aggressive, and self-interested — traits that served them well in the competitive world of business and politics. Women, in contrast, were gentle, passive, sympathetic, nurturing, selfless — and completely dependent. They were also supposedly endowed with natural purity and piety, and were therefore not only morally superior to men, but uniquely qualified to serve as society’s moral guardians. From the household, the sanctuary of the domestic sphere that shielded them from the corrupting influences of the public realm, they could employ their innate moral superiority to influence and temper the baser instincts of their husbands and sons.<sup>1</sup>

It was this longed-for “truth” about woman’s nature that led the public to anxiously seek facts about the



death of Doc Harlan that would exonerate Hattie Woolsteen. The desire for a sympathetic narrative meant that within weeks of her arrest, Hattie’s image underwent a profound transformation. No longer a she-devil, she was reimagined as a symbol of female victimization and the sexual double standard. Though the evidence against her was compelling, once she stood trial for Harlan’s murder, the jury took just over 10 minutes to acquit her of the charge.

The circumstances surrounding Harlan’s death, particularly the possibility of a female assailant, created a sensation. The desire for details was intense. In the nineteenth century,

most people believed that murder was a crime committed almost exclusively by men. Women were far more often the victims than the perpetrators. And yet when questioned by the chief of police, Hattie Woolsteen freely admitted that she had killed Doc Harlan. Her initial explanation was that it was an accident. But that was only the first of many versions of the story. And as it turned out, nothing was perfectly clear and no one was who she or he seemed to be.

It was widely suspected that Hattie and Harlan were lovers, and she was seen with him on the day of the murder, so Patrick Darcy, chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, brought her in for questioning. He did not believe her to be the guilty party, but he thought she might have important information to divulge. In fact, Hattie provided a variety of possible scenarios for Harlan’s death. When pressed for details, she told a tale of her despondent lover’s suicide. She claimed that while taking a buggy ride around the city, Harlan begged her to run away to Denver with him. When she refused his plea he pulled a pistol out of his pocket and shot himself. Fearing the sound of the gunshot would draw attention and that she would be held responsible for Harlan’s death, she determined to dispose of the body. Hattie described wrapping her right arm around his neck to hold the body upright to prevent too much blood from pooling on the buggy floor. With her left hand she took the reins and drove to Compton, a distance of about 10 miles, to the abandoned ranch of an acquaintance.

\* Cara Anzilotti is Associate Professor of History at Loyola Marymount University and the author of *She-Devil in the City of Angels: Gender, Violence and the Hattie Woolsteen Murder Case in Victorian Era Los Angeles*, from which this article is drawn.

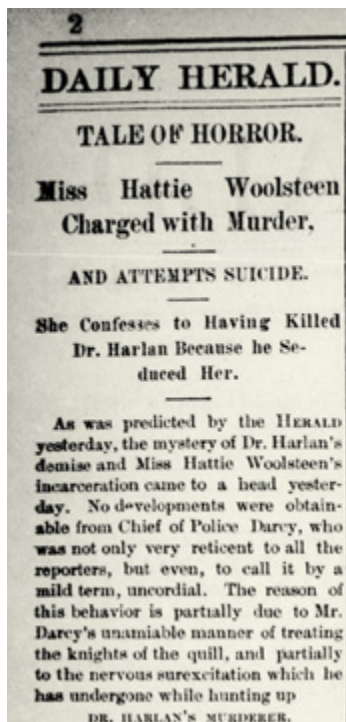
There she pushed the dead man out of the vehicle onto the floor of the barn and covered him with straw, which she set ablaze. In this first full telling, Hattie was simply the hapless witness to Harlan's self-destruction.

But Chief Darcy was unconvinced. How, he asked, had the right-handed dentist managed to shoot himself above his left ear? Without a plausible explanation, Hattie changed her story. As she was questioned by Darcy and several of his officers, she provided variations of her narrative. The details changed with each retelling. In one version, when she refused Harlan's request to go with him to Denver, he drew the pistol to murder her. She begged for her life and as they struggled over the gun it discharged accidentally, the bullet striking Harlan in the head. She provided graphic details regarding his death. By his watch, which she stole, it took ten minutes for him to expire. She related that he "kicked a few minutes and was dead."

Hattie also described the corpse striking the buggy step as she dumped it out into the barn, which she claimed explained the bludgeon marks noted in the coroner's report.

In another of Hattie's versions of events, she admitted she killed Harlan "in the heat of passion" when she learned he was a married man. She claimed she did not mean to kill him, but aimed a pistol at him to demand that he divorce his wife and make good his promise of marriage. The story changed as it was told and retold. At one point, recounting two different versions of events, she asked one of Darcy's officers his opinion as to which narrative to offer up at trial, inquiring of him, "Now Jeffries, which one is the most likely to tell effectively in court?"<sup>2</sup>

At her arraignment Hattie provided yet another iteration of the incident. She claimed that as she and Harlan sat in the buggy in a eucalyptus grove on the outskirts of the city, she was so devastated upon learning that he was a married man that she drew a pistol to kill herself. She said that as he grabbed for it the gun discharged accidentally. This version introduced two accomplices who aided her in disposing of the body, Hattie's sister Minnie and Minnie's lover, Willie Witts. Witts procured a wagon in which to transport Harlan's remains, then followed the sisters in the buggy to the abandoned Compton property. There they dragged the body into the barn, doused it with kerosene and set it ablaze. So Harlan's death was a tragic accident, she insisted, not murder.



Los Angeles Herald, *Sunday Morning, October 16, 1887.*

By the time Hattie stood trial in Los Angeles Superior Court in April, 1888, her lawyers had concocted an even more sympathetic version of the circumstances surrounding Harlan's death. G. Wiley Wells and C. C. Stephens sought to articulate a narrative credible enough to exonerate Hattie in the courtroom and redeem her in the court of public opinion. As they told it, on the night he died, Harlan and Hattie took a buggy ride to the deserted Compton ranch. There, the new account revealed, the dentist attempted to rape her. Defense counsel claimed that "in her despair over her disgrace she drew a pistol to shoot herself." When Harlan grabbed for it, it discharged, inflicting the fatal wound. Hattie then accidentally set fire to the barn when she lit a match to see Harlan's body in the darkness and dropped it in the straw.

This storyline was directly at odds with the confession Hattie had made to Chief Darcy and his officers. But

Hattie's lawyers concocted details with which to discount that damning information. They insisted that Hattie's incriminating testimony was coerced, and that Darcy threatened to rape her if she did not admit guilt. It was a charge designed specifically to throw the police investigation into complete disarray. Hattie's tale of sexual assault became a key narrative device, rendering her the innocent victim of male aggression, guaranteed to elicit the public's pity. And so, as the case went to trial, Hattie's image had been fully rehabilitated in the minds of many, Harlan was dismissed as a scoundrel who deserved his fate, and Chief Darcy emerged as the real villain in the drama.

Still, there were conflicting images of Hattie Woolsteen to be grappled with. To some who knew her, Hattie was bold, fearless, a woman who "wouldn't whimper if the whole world was against her." To others, she was the frail victim of male aggression, in need of sympathy and protection. Harlan apparently believed her to be quite wealthy, "the daughter of a cattle king." He claimed he was transacting real estate purchases on her behalf; that she had plenty of money and he "could get all he wanted of it."<sup>3</sup> When she arrived in Los Angeles, Hattie crafted a personal narrative that suggested a genteel upbringing and social respectability, claiming to be supported by regular infusions of cash from wealthy relatives. She also indicated that she planned on becoming a teacher, reinforcing that image of middle-class respectability.

In fact, Hattie was the oldest child of a bricklayer from Peoria, Illinois. She and her sister, Minnie, departed their hometown for parts west after they stole a watch. Their father paid for the watch and hustled them out of town. Their travels brought them eventually to Los Angeles in the summer of 1887 where they briefly worked as maids before moving to a downtown boarding house and the company of a large number of gentlemen callers, one of whom was Doc Harlan. So many men visited the sisters' room at the house on Fort Street (now Broadway) that their landlady, irritated, raised their rent.<sup>4</sup>

The Hattie Woolsteen who first came to the public's notice through the press following her arrest was bold and assertive. But as she stood accused of murder, she retreated into gendered conformity, altering her persona to reflect the image that society expected. At her trial she dressed modestly and stylishly in dark colors, her face obscured behind a heavy veil. More tellingly, she wore her hair in a long braid draped over her shoulder that hung to her waist, a deliberate and artful piece of imagery, meant to evoke the innocence of youth. During the nineteenth century, only girls wore their hair in braids. Women wore their hair pulled up high on their heads, off their shoulders and away from their faces. A girl put her hair up for the first time in her mid-teens as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. With her hair down, Hattie presented herself as a child, in need of support and sympathy.

If Hattie was to be rehabilitated in the public's mind she had to be reimagined as a victim. And someone had to play the part of villain. That fell to the chief of police. It was Patrick Darcy's dogged pursuit of the case against her that damned him in the eyes of the public. Resentment against him allowed for his complete vilification. The public demanded Hattie's innocence, and his refusal to let the matter go (he knew, after all, what she had confessed to him and his officers) led to his downfall. If gender convention was to remain unchallenged, then Hattie must be innocent. A guilty verdict would demand a reappraisal of society's firmly held beliefs about gender, that nature had made the sexes completely distinct. Hattie branded a murderer meant that she must possess a masculine character. And if she had manly traits, other women might also, and therefore perhaps men and women were not completely distinct after all. To Victorian society, that notion was profoundly unsettling. The public demanded to be shielded from such a forced reappraisal. The stakes were high, and Darcy and justice lost.

Darcy was decried as either hyper-masculine or emasculated, both images at odds with his reputation before the death. He had been regarded as "a firm, courageous man and an experienced officer." But his refusal to allow a more palatable narrative to be told about

Doc Harlan's death made him a transgressor against public opinion and therefore an easy target. Someone had to take the fall. If Hattie's confession was to be dismissed, those who heard it must be discredited. During Darcy's testimony at her trial, Hattie's lawyers casually demeaned him by asking "did you ever follow an honest occupation before you were Chief of Police?" A letter from a reader to the *Los Angeles Times* illustrated the public's condemnation: "The outrageous brutality of the ex-Chief of Police . . . as reported in THE TIMES, is a disgrace . . . and should be severely punished."<sup>5</sup> The campaign to demonize those who investigated the case began with the chief, then moved to his officers who, one by one, were branded as criminals, incompetents, and fools.

The press led the charge. The reporter's role in the nineteenth century was as much to entertain as to present the facts. Los Angeles boasted four daily newspapers in the 1880s, the *Times*, the *Herald*, the *Tribune* and the *Evening Express*, and all of them covered the story of the body in the barn extensively. It had all the ingredients newspapermen could desire: mystery, violent crime, and illicit sex. The case allowed reporters ample opportunity to embellish, speculate, and instruct readers how they should think about the crime, the trial and its outcome: namely, that a woman could not possibly be capable of wanton violence. The press launched an aggressive assault on Darcy's character; for Hattie to be the victim, he had to be portrayed as the villain.

The legal system abetted public opinion. During the nineteenth century the law was a malleable thing, often bowing to community sentiment. The criminal justice system pitted the letter of the law against the public's expectations, ultimately allowing for the outcome the community desired.<sup>6</sup> Hattie's lawyers certainly understood that. As they questioned prospective jurors, her defense team asked whether homicide was justifiable in the defense of a woman's honor. Each answered in the affirmative, expressing the view that, as one stated, such defense was "the first law of nature."<sup>7</sup>

Hattie's counsel crafted a narrative that would resonate with the public; one that would gratify social sensibilities in spite of the facts. They knew that the case against her was also a case against Victorian beliefs about gender and character. Middle class values and ideals themselves were at stake. Following Hattie's arrest a member of the local Woman's Suffrage Club wrote a letter to the *Times* in support of the defendant. She was pleased, she said "to see a goodly number of refined, philanthropic women present at the examination, who evidently felt it right that [Hattie] should be sustained by the presence of representatives of her own sex in the terrible ordeal . . . . She is entitled to the benefit of every reasonable doubt."<sup>8</sup> Victorian discernment relied on "truths" and an impregnable gender divide was one of those. The public was determined to

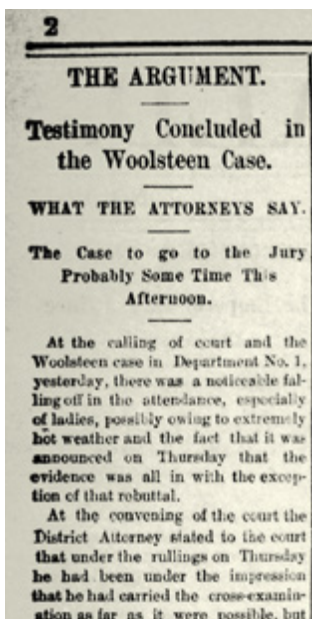
cling to the cultural conviction that a woman, by virtue of her gender, could not possibly possess the agency to commit murder. Hattie's lawyers consciously groomed her to play the part of sympathetic defendant. Her confession was ultimately deemed inadmissible because it was made to law enforcement officers without a lawyer present. For reasons not made clear, the prosecution did not present potentially damning testimony at trial, including other injuries to Harlan's body or the fire that destroyed the barn.

The story told in court during the 11-day trial fit neatly within the bounds of gender convention, that Hattie shot Harlan accidentally when she brandished a pistol as he attempted to rape her. His fate was therefore well deserved. During the nineteenth century, male sexual predation was regarded as particularly dangerous to an orderly society, and it was feared to be on the rise. As a result of that

anxiety, the so-called unwritten law was often deployed to exonerate a man accused of murder committed to avenge a woman's honor. In fact, the press briefly reported a fictitious account that insisted the true killer was Hattie's cousin who traveled to Los Angeles to avenge her.<sup>9</sup> Manly virtue required an aggressive response to any assault on womanly virtue. Juries routinely acquitted men of killing the seducers of their wives, daughters or sisters, believing that their actions were justified. Manliness called for the protection of female purity by any means.<sup>10</sup>

But what was regarded as an act of chivalry when undertaken by a man was deemed criminality of the most unsettling sort when the assailant was a woman. The public balked at the notion of a woman acting on her own behalf to redress her grievances and restore her honor through violence. In light of that anxiety, therefore, Hattie's narrative did not imagine her actively avenging herself. Rather, she was simply the victim of circumstances she could not control.

The all-male jury (women were barred from serving on juries until the twentieth century) deliberating Hattie Woolsteen's fate understood that in certain respects truth is irrelevant. The jurors considered the competing versions of the facts presented at Hattie's trial, that she was either the aggressor or the victim of sexual assault and killed Harlan in self-defense, and arrived at a verdict in line with



Los Angeles Herald, *Saturday Morning, April 14, 1888.*

cultural convention. The jurors looked beyond the law and weighed the evidence against societal expectations and values. The jurors applied community norms to their judgment, and those norms insisted that a woman could not be guilty of premeditated murder. The men tasked with deciding Hattie's fate employed jury nullification, setting aside the evidence to render the verdict that they desired and that the public expected.

The jurors returned to the packed courtroom just over 10 minutes after they left, and declared Hattie Woolsteen not guilty. The room erupted in enthusiastic applause. Spectators lined up to shake Hattie's hand. A large crowd gathered in the street outside cheered.

Ultimately it did not matter who killed Doc Harlan or who the real Hattie Woolsteen was, or for that matter who was the real Charles Harlan, or Patrick Darcy. Hattie became a stock character in a Victorian

melodrama, telling us more about the audience and its values than providing clarity about the circumstances surrounding Charles Harlan's death. Hattie Woolsteen's trial for his murder threatened to upend Victorian gender roles that her acquittal and social redemption at least temporarily restored. ★

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," 18 *Amer. Qtlly* (1966): 151-74.
2. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 11, 1887.
3. *Id.*, Nov. 4, 1887; Apr. 7, 1888.
4. *Id.*, Apr. 10, 1888.
5. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 6, 1887; Apr. 8, 1888; Apr. 13, 1888 [capitalization in original].
6. See Lawrence Friedman and Robert Percival, *The Roots of Justice: Crime and Punishment in Alameda County, California, 1870-1910*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1981.
7. *Los Angeles Herald*, Apr. 14, 1888.
8. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 16, 1887.
9. *Los Angeles Herald*, Oct. 16, 1887; *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 18, 1887.
10. See also Robert M. Ireland, "The Libertine Must Die: Sexual Dishonor and the Unwritten Law in the Nineteenth Century United States," 23 *J. of Soc. Hist.* (Fall 1989).

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