11 A New Man for a New Century: Dr. Crippen and the Principles of Masculinity

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In London, 23 November 1910, the American Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen was hanged for the murder of his wife, Cora. In October Crippen’s trial had lasted five days, but the case itself commanded newspaper attention for nearly six months. Further, it has not only earned Crippen a place at Madame Tussaud’s, but also prompted an array of fictionalized retellings, and has figured in retrospective accounts of sensational British crimes for over 80 years. Even with numbers of new entrants to the field, Crippen continues to jostle among a select few contenders for the title of Britain’s second most famous murderer.

Despite many dramatic elements, the case played out the most commonplace story of the love triangle gone disastrously wrong. Yet if the plot was familiar, contemporary interest was nonetheless riveted to its steady pace of sensational disclosure. Newspaper coverage of the “North London Cellar Murder” began with the discovery of partial remains presumed to be the missing Cora Crippen; continued through the trans-Atlantic pursuit of the fleeing suspects and their dramatic “Capture by Wireless”; speculated on the adulterous relations of Crippen and his shorthand-typist, Ethel Le Neve; sought detail of the checkered pasts of the principals; shuddered with relish at the grisly forensic detail of the trial; and kept a subdued death watch until Crippen’s execution. Crippen was convicted of poisoning his wife with hyoscine, then mutilating her body: beheading it, dismembering it, removing her sexual organs, and burying the fileted remains of her torso in his coal cellar. The state of the remains spoke for a particularly methodical viciousness consonant with other details underscoring Crippen’s cold self-interest: his pressed financial circumstances that could be alleviated with his wife’s property; his quick installation of his mistress, Le Neve, in the
Disorder in the Court

house to live over the remains; and, as a suggestion of abnormality “naturally” reflecting depravity, his flight to Canada with Le Neve cross-dressed as his son. Set behind the closed doors of a seemingly benign if dreary suburb, the case offered adultery, sexual violence, and cross-dressing, all underwritten by greed, and Crippen’s questionable professional life of medical quackery conducted at the margins of the law.

In this light, an early *New York Times* article headlined “Explaining the Keenness of Interest” (30 July 1910) would seem superfluous. Yet the author, writing while the trans-Atlantic chase was still proceeding, reflected reporters’ pervasive ambivalence about whether to value the extraordinary or the ordinary in the drama. Remarkably, by the close of six months of newspaper attention – and Crippen’s conviction – the image of a cold-blooded murderer and mutilator failed to take hold, either in the rapidly shifting perspectives of the popular press, in legal professionals’ commentaries, or, for that matter, in the robust latter-day genre of true-crime coffeetable books. Rather, Crippen’s unique appeal among murderers is reflected in the title, for example, of Tom Cullen’s reconstruction of the case, *Crippen: the Mild Murderer* (1977).

Arguably, the most remarkable feature of the case is the transformation of Crippen from the vicious mad-dog killer and likely sexual degenerate of early police and newspaper speculation to the principled, honorable, and beleaguered little man whose necessary execution was met with rueful regret. However, just as remarkable is how compelling this construction of the banal and the benign appears to have been. While crowds at well publicized criminal trials are often large, even in this the Crippen case excelled: newspapers ran photographs of thousands choking the streets outside the Old Bailey lining up for passes to the trial, which were issued for half-days only in order to accommodate the extraordinary interest. In 1910, the Crippen case could reasonably have been added to a string of public shocks taken as anxious or, in some cases, deplorable signs of the times. The year had already offered the death of King Edward VII, the death of Charles Stewart Rolls in a dramatic aviation test accident, the revelation of Arthur Munby’s secret marriage and erotic obsessions, and the street dramas of labor strikes and massive suffrage marches. With events that could be framed as somberly epoch-making or as signs of dangerously experimental technologies or of moral depravity or as disturbing disintegrations of social stability, the narrativizing of the Crippen case is remarkable precisely for what appears a nearly perverse effort to normalize its most sensational elements. The *New York Times* writer’s desire to explain “the Keenness of Interest” is, retrospectively, even more pertinent.