

Article

# 'A Shocking State of Domestic Unhappiness': Male Victims of Female Violence and the Courts in Late Nineteenth Century Stafford

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**Abstract:** Instances where men were the victims of female violence in the past are very difficult to explore, especially when the violence took place in a domestic setting. There is now a notable body of work on violence in the nineteenth century but none that looks specifically at male victims of violence where there was a female perpetrator, and their treatment by the courts. This article goes some way in filling that gap by using data collected in researching female offenders at the end of the nineteenth century in Stafford. It argues that, as with violence where there was a female victim and female perpetrator, the courts and the press were similarly unconcerned and somewhat dismissive of female violence towards men in a domestic setting, thus being unsympathetic towards male victims of female violence.

**Keywords:** female violence; petty sessions; male victims; domestic violence

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'The complainant, whose head was almost concealed in bandages, went into the witness box and declared that he was struck with something and found himself outside the door of his house. He saw the blood-stained table knife [produced] on a table in his house. He believed his wife struck him but was not certain. PC Moss said the prisoner told him she had had a few words with her husband, and he had 'got no more than he asked for'. [1]

On 20 September 1900, thirty-six-year-old Eliza Coulson was committed to Stafford prison for two calendar months with hard labour by local magistrates for aggravated assault on her husband. She had pleaded guilty to attacking her husband with a knife [2]. Whilst in the witness box, Eliza 'told the court that her husband locked her out and provoked a quarrel with her. He struck her, and she acted in self-defence. Mr Averill [the magistrates' chairman] said the charge was a serious one of unlawful wounding, which had now been reduced to aggravated assault, and it was fortunate that the wounds inflicted had not proved fatal' [1]. Eliza served her two months in Stafford prison [3], but whether she then went home to Thomas is not clear [4]. Unfortunately, though, a year later, both Eliza and Thomas and their five children were all living in Stafford workhouse [5]. It is difficult to be certain which of the two was the aggressor when Eliza attacked Thomas with a knife, and the police certainly did seem to accept that there was a degree of provocation in reducing the charge. But they did not totally accept Eliza's claim of self-defence and still charged her with aggravated assault, possibly because Eliza had a history of violence whereas Thomas did not. Thomas Coulson never appeared before Stafford magistrates accused of assaulting Eliza, or for any other offence involving violence towards anyone else. From the lack of any prosecutions for violence, we cannot however say he was not violent just that he was never charged. However, Eliza was not a stranger to the court—she had been previously prosecuted for assault. The preceding year, Eliza had been twice prosecuted for assault of their neighbours William Holden, the local chimney sweep, and his wife Hannah Holden, for which she served twenty-seven days hard labour in Stafford prison [3].

The Coulson's background and circumstances were quite usual for people living in provincial English towns during the late nineteenth century. They were born and raised within a few streets of each other in Stafford and had married in 1884 when Eliza was twenty years old [5,6]. Six months after the birth of their fifth child and after sixteen years of marriage, the fighting between Eliza and Thomas brought the couple to court with this prosecution in 1900. It is possible that this event was a one-off outburst of violence, but it is more likely to have been the culmination of years of discord. Other Stafford couples had similar stories. For example, in February 1892, Alice Follows was sent to Stafford prison for twenty-one days with hard labour for being drunk and disorderly and common assault. However, the local newspaper, *The Staffordshire Advertiser*, revealed the assault was on her husband Edwin Follows and stated that 'the evidence disclosed a shocking state of domestic unhappiness' [7]. Even though Alice and Edwin had seven children, all living with them, it was not the first, nor last, time Alice had been summonsed for assaulting Edwin. Just one month earlier, Alice had been bound over to keep the peace by Stafford magistrates for assaulting her husband.

At that latter hearing, Edwin Follows had asked the magistrates if they would grant him a separation order; the magistrates agreed to Edwin's request [8]. Under the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, women who were the victims of male violence in marriage were able to seek a protection order from a magistrates' court. It was in effect a judicial separation and gave women custody of their children. Though not a divorce as such, as divorce was almost impossible for working-class couples to secure, it was not costly and so was ostensibly available to working class women. Although the court could technically only agree to a woman's request for a separation order, Stafford magistrates seemingly considered Alice's violence towards Edwin serious enough to use their discretion and grant a separation order even though it was Edwin who had requested one. It seems though that the couple continued to live together as two years later, when Alice was (again) fined for being drunk and disorderly, the police testified that she also 'was very violent, assaulted her husband and threw the furniture into the street' [9]. Similar to Thomas Coulson, Edwin Follows never appeared in court on a charge of assaulting Alice but, unlike Thomas, by 1899 Edwin had left the matrimonial home due to Alice's 'intemperate conduct' [10,11].

Female violence is one of the hardest crimes to trace in the historical records due to the hidden nature of violence in the home, further complicated by male victims' reticence to report assaults by women and a lack of detail in the records as court registers provide the bare facts of the cases heard, with usually just date of the offence, name of defendant and complainant, and adjudication listed [12]. Examples of violent women though are not unusual—there were several violent women living in Stafford at this time who came before the magistrates accused of assault [13]. What was unusual was the clear case of a wife assaulting her husband being prosecuted in court as seen in the case of Eliza Coulson. Undoubtedly, women were prosecuted for violence towards their partners. However, evidence of female violence towards men was more often obtained through detail reports when a woman was prosecuted for a different offence. Drawing on data relating to all events for which women were brought as defendants before the Stafford Borough Petty Sessions, including those subsequently committed to the Quarter Sessions and Assizes, from 1 January 1880 to 31 December 1905 [13], this article discusses cases of violence where there was an adult male victim and a female perpetrator in Stafford, a mid-sized market town and the county town of Staffordshire, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and examines how the courts viewed and dealt with such cases. In so doing, this article also discusses general societal and judicial attitudes towards violent women and discusses their male victims' access to justice.

Cases of violence, whether committed in the domestic sphere or not and whether perpetrated by men or women, were usually dealt with by magistrates in the Petty Sessions [14] and only serious cases of violence, such as murder and rape for example, were committed by the magistrates to the Quarter Sessions [15] or Assizes [16,17]. Although the data from which this article draws collated the details of all cases where there was a female perpetrator in Stafford, all the cases of female violence where there was a male victim that was committed in a domestic context were heard and dealt with by Stafford

magistrates; none were committed to the higher court. As with the rest of the country outside London, Assizes courts came to Stafford twice a year, and Quarter Sessions were held four times a year, but Stafford Petty Sessions were normally held each Monday, Wednesday and Friday and were normally chaired by the Mayor of the town [13]. During the nineteenth century, court registers were routinely kept, and the Quarter Sessions and Assizes records have survived in many jurisdictions, although these are registers rather than verbatim reports. Under the 1879 Summary Jurisdiction Act, summary courts were also legally required to keep a register that recorded all convictions and court orders [12]; very few of these Petty Sessions records have survived, which makes research on prosecutions in these lower courts very difficult. In Staffordshire, however, the late nineteenth century police records have survived and are in good condition [2]. As well as being a period that can be researched because the police records have survived, the late Victorian and early Edwardian years make a good time to study female violence towards men as the rate of female offending was statistically declining [18,19]. Also, despite the low numbers, female offending was a prominent source of anxiety for contemporaries. Such concerns though were mainly related to women committing serious and gendered offences such as baby farming and infanticide [20–22] rather than violent offences [19].

From the late twentieth century onwards, violence that occurs in a domestic setting, usually between people living together, is generally included under the umbrella term ‘domestic abuse’ and includes all such violence where the relationship is between married or co-habiting couple, siblings, father or mother and offspring—generally people living together with a familial bond [23]. From the first twentieth century attempts to implement specific legislation on domestic violence in the United Kingdom starting with the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 to the most recent Crime and Security Act 2010 which introduced Domestic Violence Protection Notices and Domestic Violence Protection Orders, the term ‘domestic violence’ was gradually replaced, in most instances, by ‘domestic abuse’ to better reflect the insidious, controlling and coercive nature of this type of behaviour. Before then, and certainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, violence between people with a familial bond was essentially considered a private affair with which others outside the family, including the police, should not be concerned [24]. This did not make such behaviour legal. For example, until the advent of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), poor treatment of children by their parents or guardians was usually dealt with under the ambit of neglect rather than violence or abuse. Indeed, even when the NSPCC was established in 1889, most cases brought by them in the first few decades of their existence continued to be neglect cases [13]. Regarding adults, it was only when serious violence occurred in a domestic context between a man and woman who lived together whether formally married or not that the incident would come to court, and then it was referred to as ‘marital violence’ [25].

When violence between men and women in a domestic relationship occurs, it is usually the case of a man attacking his female partner or ex-partner—at present, in the twenty-first century, around seventy percent of the cases that come to court in England and Wales involve a female victim and a male perpetrator [23]. Although it is difficult to arrive at an accurate figure, similar is roughly true of the late nineteenth century as the majority of female violence cases that came to court involved a male perpetrator and female victim [26,27]. When such cases were heard, they would often be the end result of severe or prolonged instances of violence as many preceding instances of violence may have been resolved informally, with neighbours and family providing refuge and support, rather than in court, and almost certainly the tip of the iceberg [24].

There is now a notable body of work on interpersonal violence in the nineteenth century. Wood [28] has written about changing attitudes towards violence generally in the nineteenth century and Wiener [29] argues that courts came to view serious violence by men against women more and more seriously over the nineteenth century arguing that ‘men’s violence, particularly against women ... was viewed with ever-greater disapproval and treated with ever-greater severity’ (p. xii). Similarly, Godfrey, Farrall and Karstedt [30] have written about how late nineteenth century courts viewed and dealt with violent men and women who engaged in interpersonal violence, suggesting that magistrates

handed down more convictions and harsher penalties to men involved in 'male' contexts of violence than they did to women involved in 'female' contexts, indicating that magistrates aimed their efforts of civilizing lower-class communities at what they considered 'dangerous masculinities'. This, they argue, demonstrates that magistrates considered assaults committed by women as less important and 'seems to reflect a more "dismissive" and perhaps "contemptuous" attitude toward women' [30] (p. 717). There is also notable work, for example that by Palk [31], that provides useful insights into gender and sentencing more broadly. Godfrey [32] has written about early twentieth century young violent women and Davies [33] discusses girls' violence in relation to gang culture in the late nineteenth century. Godfrey's work [34] on public attitudes towards non-lethal violence at this time, particularly men's violence, suggests that levels of violence had not necessarily declined to the extent judicial statistics show, and he argues that the scale of violence never reported belies changes in public sensibilities towards violence in general. Crone's [35] perceptive analysis of a Victorian Punch and Judy show provides an excellent succinct overview of contemporary views of both violence against women and violence by women. Frost [27] has analysed the interpersonal violence between married and co-habiting couples perpetrated by both the male and the female partner and suggests that co-habiting couples had different stressors than married couples. Turner [19] has written specifically about women and their violence towards other women, mainly during neighbourhood disputes, during the late nineteenth century, suggesting that it was the proximity to one's neighbours, rather than abject squalor and overcrowding, which was the preamble to quarrels, conflict and violence that simmered and flared intermittently. There is also notable work that concentrates on women as victims of violence. D'Cruze [26] and Savage [36] have written about female victims of domestic violence and Stevenson [37] has written about female victims of sexual assault. Least documented in the academic literature is how the courts viewed and dealt with violence in the past when there was a male victim and female perpetrator, a gap that this article begins to address.

There are several factors that contribute to the gap in knowledge about adult male victims of female violence. Largely, it is due to the paucity of such cases; for men, the ignominy of publicly admitting their inability to control their wives and the embarrassment of admitting their victimhood prevented them, and still prevents many from, coming forward. Although this situation may be changing in the twenty-first century, with more and more men coming forward, it was certainly a factor in the nineteenth century [38]. Another contributing factor is the resultant lack of empirical evidence to draw on. As discussed above, interpersonal violence between couples, in the rare situation that such a case did come to court, unless serious, was usually dealt with in the petty sessions—and it is difficult to gather detail about the cases that came to the petty sessions. Few records from the petty sessions have survived and when they do survive, they contain scant detail with just name of defendant, name of complainant, offence, adjudication and sentence recorded [12]. These court records provide no detail as to the circumstances of the case, the relationship between the defendant and complainant, the home circumstances of the couple. For that, newspapers and police custody books fill in some gaps.

There was negligible crime reporting from the Petty Sessions as provincial newspapers (such as *The Staffordshire Advertiser*) tended to provide quite matter-of-fact information about cases with the occasional snippet of detail or quoted statements made by defendants or magistrates. That said, the importance of the provincial press for historians of crime is now widely recognized, and crime reports have informed the work of several studies, for example, D'Cruze [26] and Davies [33]. In the occasional case that there is detailed reporting or even quality snippets from cases, attitudinal perceptions of crime and offending albeit predominately male, and until well into the twentieth century also anonymous, perceptions can occasionally be appreciated [39]. Some reports can give a distinct impression of opinion, whether as to the motivation and justification for certain offences or reaction to the law, revealing the attitudes of the police, magistrates and, of course, the opinion of the journalist who wrote those reports. For these reasons, and despite the deficiencies, newspaper reports can be useful.

Police custody books kept by Staffordshire Police for the second half of the nineteenth century have survived and contain a wealth of detail, including the particulars of people and arrests that did not subsequently go to court, the circumstances of the person arrested when apprehended, and sometimes the words spoken by the person arrested on being brought to the police station [2]. Rather than triangulating these records to create a snapshot of that offence, at that time, in that place, the data from which this article was drawn collated court, prison and newspaper data for which a woman was brought to court, used Birth, Death and Marriage records, and the censuses to produce a life grid for recidivist women in Stafford [13]. This longitudinal, life course approach [40–44] essentially builds a picture of people's lives in the past, from cradle-to-grave, juxtaposing significant life events such as for example employment, forming meaningful relationships, having children, against such events for example as being arrested, convicted and imprisoned. Watkins [43] (p. 127) argues that 'it is not possible to uncover internal decision-making, but the paths individuals forged for themselves can still be uncovered—through an investigation of potential turning points'. As such, this approach is a perspective in which Watkins goes on to argue 'offending is seen as it was: unusual and secondary in the lives of most offenders'.

There were 2869 events in which women were defendants before Stafford magistrates between 1880 and 1905, with 176 recidivist offenders committing nearly half of those offences. Not all 176 recidivist offenders could be traced through the records to produce complete or even near complete life grids, largely because they were itinerant or gave many iterations of their names, places of birth, or family members and so forth. However, life grids were compiled for 110 recidivist women. These women tended to be locally born and fairly static; they often had families and employment, and their partners were similarly unvarying. Included in the 110 women for whom life grids were constructed [13], are recidivist women who were violent towards their partner. There were just eighteen of these 110 women who were brought to court for violence towards a man, invariably a man they were in a relationship with. As such, a crime that was barely visible in court and newspaper reports can now be seen. Significantly, drawing on the data regarding female defendants in Stafford, this article can also offer a more nuanced picture of domestic 'unhappiness'. It does this by adding to those cases where women were found guilty of violence toward men, those cases of female violence that came to court but were dismissed and cases where couples appeared in court on other charges but where the evidence revealed a situation of women's violence towards her partner.

Zedner [45] argues that the behaviour of women during the late nineteenth century was set against Victorian constructions of femininity and womanhood; women were wives and mothers, they were to be pure, submissive and modest, caring for their families and children and managing the home. She argues that women who broke the law were judged against these values as well as against the law; they were considered 'doubly-deviant'. However, this seems not to have been the case, especially where assault by working-class women in Stafford at least were concerned [13]. Often, rather than romantic unions, working-class marriages, including relationships which were not formally legalised, of which there seemed to be many in Stafford as elsewhere in England [27], in the past tended to be dispassionate affairs based upon mutual expectations of economic advantage and broadly accepted, if regionally diverse, ideas of domains and responsibilities within marriage [27,46]. However, latent tensions could erupt if role assumptions were transgressed [47]. Some women might initiate violence, particularly if their husbands stayed out too late drinking or questioned their fidelity. Conversely, women's command over the domestic space might conflict with the patriarchal assumptions of an authoritarian man. As D'Cruze [26] suggests, wives who failed to provide expected domestic services, having a meal ready when their husbands returned from work, for example, might be met with serious assault and Frost [27] suggests that arguments over scant resources often led to violence. Although it would be wrong to suggest that such violence perpetrated by either partner was universal, a degree of 'rough usage' was often seen as an acceptable feature of working-class marriage. As Hammerton [48] (p. 43) argues, 'a level of community tolerance of domestic violence was shared by both men and women, up to a certain threshold short of severe injury or murder'.



Alongside community tolerance, judicial tolerance was also evident. It seems that some magistrates accepted domestic tension would, occasionally, come to violence [49], including tension between co-habiting couples [27], and Stafford magistrates did not always respond to severe injury with harsh sanction. For example, in 1894, Margaret Gavin, an Irish woman living in Stafford at the end of the nineteenth century, 'struck her husband [John] on the head with a quart measure, an injury which necessitated detention in the infirmary' [50]. Although she had caused a 'depressed fracture of her husband's skull', she was discharged from court with a caution as the magistrates considered she had been 'greatly provoked' [51]. The cause of the provocation is not clear from the newspaper report or the police records but was obviously explained to the magistrates. Neither John nor Margaret Gavin came before Stafford magistrates either before or after this appearance although both continued to live together in Stafford. It is therefore difficult to decipher the extent of the female tension or comment on Margaret's violence. What is clear is that Stafford magistrates were willing to caution a woman who had fractured her husband's skull, possibly accepting that there had been some happening in their relationship to induce her to such action. It is also clear that Stafford magistrates sometimes considered both the man and woman to be as bad as each other. In 1881, Sergeant Hackney testified that since their marriage Mary and Joseph Cooper had 'led a cat and dog life' when they were in court for fighting. He continued by testifying that he saw 'the woman throwing paving stones at her husband in Gaol Square, and pulling him by the hair', although 'Cooper struck her in return, and knocked her over' [52]. *Both* were bound over to keep the peace by Stafford magistrates.

Cases of interpersonal, domestic violence that resulted in prosecution were either extreme or part of a long-term catalogue of assaults. Davis [53] and Hammerton [48] have suggested the humiliation and loss of self-esteem, and publicly acknowledging that their marriages were a failure, prevented many men and women seeking legal redress in the first place. For women, the courts were the last resort in a desperate bid to put an end to a husband's excessive violence [54]. The possibility of reprisal from convicted husbands upon release from prison would have loomed large in the decision of some women not to prosecute. Wives that did prosecute husbands faced several dilemmas once the case reached court. Custodial sentences for the male breadwinner, for instance, resulted in financial hardship for wives battling to make ends meet. Such problems troubled middle-class reformers and the notion of a man's 'reasonable' chastisement of his wife began to disappear towards the end of the nineteenth century, resulting in a number of legislative measures to protect married women. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 gave magistrates the power to grant quick separation orders to women in the case of aggravated physical assault and the 1895 Summary Jurisdiction Act allowed wives cheap separation orders if their husbands were imprisoned for at least two months [55,56]. However, Gleadle [57] argues that many of the matrimonial law reforms of this period were insensitive to the real needs of working-class women, and merely exacerbated their vulnerability. Moreover, she argues, separation orders often proved temporary, as destitute women felt compelled to return to abusive husbands for financial reasons, mainly because local authorities would not provide outdoor relief to deserted wives for the first twelve months—a policy Gleadle [57] argues, that led to desperate poverty. For men, having a wife prosecuted for assault would probably mean no caregiver for the children and no one to look after the home rather than financial hardship, although many working-class wives did work to supplement the family income [13]. Some men might have also feared reprisals from their violent wives.

Even if couples did prosecute each other or report the violence to the police, magistrates frequently encouraged couples to settle their differences and try to live together, regardless of which partner committed the violence [48]. For example, when William Perkin was summonsed in 1895 for punching his wife in the face, 'the Major asked if there was any chance of the case being settled out of court.' However, although William was willing to do this, his wife Sarah remained adamant that 'she would not live with her husband again if anyone gave her a thousand pounds to do so' [58]. Sarah Perkin was obviously not concerned about any financial hardship a separation would bring. Neither was Jane Higginson. In 1894, when Jane was in court for attempting to commit suicide, the magistrates

dismissed the case but Jane insisted 'she would rather go back to gaol than live with her husband' (Jane had been held on remand in Stafford prison after her suicide attempt) [59]. The magistrates did not send Jane back to prison, instead she went back to live with her husband (maybe because she had nowhere else to go) but she started to appear in court regularly on summonses for theft and drunkenness which indicate a continued unhappiness. Some women used the magistrates' court to discipline and warn off abusive husbands rather than wanting a separation. For example, when William Carless was prosecuted in 1903 for assaulting his wife Eliza, the magistrates wanted to adjourn the case for two months as he promised to sign the pledge after she had testified that he 'was alright when sober' [60].

Virtually all the 110 women for whom a life grid was constructed formed a significant relationship and lived with a man for a considerable period of time whether they formally married or not [13,61]. For many of these women, there were indications of domestic strife. These indications included separations, prosecutions for female assault, prosecutions for disturbing the peace by fighting with each other, shouting or using obscene language towards each other in the street, and references to an unhappy home life made in other cases. Sometimes, in prosecutions for disturbing the peace, rather than a neighbourhood row or a woman causing a nuisance, in several cases it was couples fighting. For example, when Harriet Falkner and her husband assaulted Mary Raferty in 1887, it was because Mary had 'intervened to make the peace' during the course of the Faulkner's 'quarrel' out in the street where they all lived [62]. Such cases as this would not have come to court had it not been for the police arresting the Faulkners for assault on Mary Raferty. It was then the testimony given in the hearing that revealed the fighting in the street between the Faulkners.

Husbands also testified against their wives when jointly summonsed for neglecting their children. In all the cases of neglect brought by the NSPCC Inspector in Stafford at the end of the nineteenth century, under cross-examination, each man was able to prove he provided financially for the family. As far as Stafford magistrates were concerned, if a man could demonstrate that he provided financially for any children, he was considered to have fulfilled his responsibility for their care. However, each husband placed the blame for the children's neglect on his respective wife's alcohol (mis)use. For example, in 1892 James Plimner, husband of Emily Plimner, 'attributed the state of the house and children to the drunken habits of his wife' [63]. John Carless, husband of Mary Jane Carless, testified in 1904, 'she has a drop of beer, I give her my wages. It is no fault of mine. She has been drinking week after week, and she was drunk last night. A lot of things have gone out of the house. She has pawned them' [64]. On their second joint appearance before Stafford magistrates on a charge of neglect of children, Charles Simpson, husband of Beatrice Simpson, testified in 1899 that 'his wife was of drunken habits and had even sold the food he had provided for the children in order to get drink' [65]. Beatrice took umbrage at her husband's testimony against her and lashed out at him,

'The Mayor said the Bench considered it was the worst case that had come before the court, and they had decided to send her to prison for six months with hard labour. The husband asked if he could have a separation order, but the magistrate's clerk [Mr H. H. Jordan] said the court had no power to grant him one. The defendant, who had behaved in a very disorderly manner during the hearing of the case, made a rush at her husband as the police were leading her from the court and struck him on the back of the head. The Bench ordered her to be brought back, and she was charged with the assault and sentenced to another month's imprisonment, the Mayor observing that the defendant had committed gross contempt of court'. [65]

Following their respective appearances, not surprisingly, Beatrice and Charles Simpson separated although this time, the magistrates had not exercised discretion to grant a separation order, but Mary Jane Carless and Emily Plimner remained living in Stafford with their children and husbands.

Jealousy could drive women to assault their male partner. Throwing vitriol (otherwise known as oil of vitriol or sulphuric acid), was a particular late nineteenth and early twentieth century crime,

although it has had a twenty-first century resurgence [66]. Although stereotypically seen as a female crime, Watson [67,68] argues that it was as likely to be perpetrated by men as women and in industrial disputes as well as in interpersonal attacks. Of all the cases involving female violence in Stafford during the late nineteenth century, it was Mary Pearson, ‘the widow of a cheese factory’ [69] (presumably Mary had inherited a cheese factory from her late husband), who appeared in Stafford magistrates court on the ‘Serious Charge’ of throwing vitriol at Joseph Cooper with intent to do him grievous bodily harm [70]. Mary and Joseph had been living together as man and wife for various periods during the preceding two or three years. One Saturday evening in 1880, Joseph, a local farmer, was at a house in Newport Road, when Mary went to him and asked him to come out, saying that if he did not, she would cut her throat. He came out and spoke to her, but refused to go with her, and went to the Lichfield Arms Inn instead. Mary followed him to the inn but was barred from entering. About an hour later, she returned to the Lichfield Arms and went to the room where Joseph was sitting with several other people. Mary said she wanted to speak to Joseph, and that if he did not come out, she would destroy both herself and him the next morning. Joseph refused, at which point Mary threw the vitriol onto his head, face and neck, which ‘caused him extreme pain’ [70]. Inspector Chaplain arrested Mary at the Lichfield Arms, where she had been detained, and on Sunday morning he charged her, to which she replied ‘I didn’t intend to injure anyone but Cooper I did intend to injure him and myself also. I told him I would do so. I asked him not to drive me to destruction. I have sent him letters from time to time, and they are now in his possession, in which I told him I should destroy myself, and a telegram to the same effect. He has exposed it to bad women in the streets’ [70]. Mary was bailed and committed for trial at the next assizes.

However, in October 1880 just seven months after the throwing of the vitriol, Mary and Joseph married. When the case came before the Assizes in January 1881, the ‘bill was not preferred’ and the case was not pressed. For the judge, the marriage ‘*was the best thing that could have happened*’ and ‘*although a very serious class of offence, it was a very light case*’ (italics added) [71]. Similar to the overarching view that ‘settling the case out of court’ would be best expressed by magistrates in William and Sarah Perkin mentioned above, the Judge in Mary and Joseph’s case also thought it best not to press for prosecution as the couple had married, and presumably any further violence could be contained in the home. Although vitriol throwing was a serious offence, it was often treated sympathetically [67]. Victims of vitriol throwing, however, could suffer serious physical, emotional and economic consequences, especially if the injuries were permanent. Being ‘the widow of a cheese factory’ [69], it may have been that Joseph married Mary despite the vitriol throwing for financial reasons. Although unlikely, it will never be known whether they simply settled their differences. Their marriage, however, was not the end to the friction between them. A few months later, in March 1881, both Mary Cooper (as she was now named), and Joseph were imprisoned for one month, in default of finding sureties for their good behaviour, for fighting in the Market Square [2]. Mary and Joseph did finally separate, and Mary spent her remaining years living in Stafford workhouse.

Many of the cases for assault that came to court where there was a male victim and a female perpetrator were treated very leniently by Stafford magistrates [2,12]. In cases of cross-summonses, where both parties prosecuted each other for a similar offence, the magistrates dismissed the case against the female partner and upheld that against the man. For example, William Green took out a summons to prosecute his wife Hannah for assault in 1892. Stafford magistrates dismissed this case but upheld Hannah’s cross-prosecution of William for assault—he was fined five shillings plus court costs (of another five shillings) and the magistrates granted a separation order. In 1905, Eliza Butler was prosecuted for assault by her husband Thomas. The magistrates dismissed this case but upheld the cross-prosecution bought by Eliza against her husband. In 1889, Annie Wardle and her husband James similarly took out summonses for assault against each other. Stafford magistrates found both guilty but ordered each to pay the court costs only. Even when the case did not involve a cross-prosecution, the magistrates often dismissed a case of violence by the female partner or the police reduced the charge. For example, in 1903, Sarah Leadbetter was prosecuted for assault by



Thomas Coleman, her partner, but Stafford magistrates dismissed the case. In 1895, Eliza Walker was prosecuted for unlawfully wounding James Nash, her partner. The offence was reduced to common assault and Eliza was bound over for five pounds and one surety of five pounds for six months. Eliza had originally been prosecuted for unlawful wounding as she had stabbed James during a quarrel over the evening meal. As James was getting up from the table, Eliza insisted that she thought he was going to hit her. She stabbed him with the bread knife she was already holding. Presumably, it was her mitigation that led to the police reducing the charge to common assault [72].

Even when the woman was found guilty of the assault, the sentence would be lenient. When Harriet Hanlon was found guilty in 1892 of assaulting husband Albert, Stafford magistrates committed Harriet to Stafford prison for just one day. In 1896, when Mary Hawkins was found guilty of assaulting her husband, she was ordered to pay the court costs only. Ann Fisher fared a little worse. When found guilty of 'being drunk and disorderly, using very bad language and threatening to strike her husband with a jug' in Queen Street in 1886 [73], Stafford magistrates fined her two shillings and six pence and ordered her to pay the court's costs of five shillings and Ann Birkbeck, the landlady of the Plume and Feathers Public House in Stafford, was fined ten shillings and ordered to pay the court's costs when she was found guilty of assaulting her husband in 1880. Ann spent fourteen days in Stafford prison in default of payment of the fine.

The eighteen women mentioned in this article are *all* those prosecuted for assaulting their male partners in Stafford between 1880 and 1905—relatively few considering there were 2869 events in which women were defendants before Stafford magistrates between those dates. Women were much more likely to come to court accused of assaulting another woman than they were her male partner. This is likely to be because violence where there was a female perpetrator and female victim was more likely to take place in the public sphere rather than in the home so was more visible and more likely to disturb the peace. Violence between a man and woman was more likely to take place in the home and was thus less visible, and less likely to attract attention. It is only by looking in depth at female offending, which this article has done, that instances of domestic violence by women against men can be seen. Although there were only a few cases where women were prosecuted for assaulting a man, it is clear that some women were violent and were violent toward their menfolk. However, even if the accusation of assault by women was upheld by the court, it is also clear that in none of the cases discussed above were women punished harshly. In fact, the contrary can be claimed—Stafford magistrates were not overly concerned with female violence in any form towards the end of the nineteenth century. As with cases in which women assaulted other women [19], neither Stafford magistrates nor the press were overly concerned with women who assaulted their menfolk. However, in cases of violence in a female context, where the victim and the perpetrator were both female, it could be assumed that the magistrates were not unduly bothered precisely because of the female nature of the offence. But it seems that similar is also true where there was a male victim. In none of the cases was there any indication that the magistrates or the press were concerned about the male victim and sought to stamp out such offences. Although an absence does not necessarily prove the contrary, there seemed to be no severe punishments handed down by the magistrates and no harsh words quoted in the press to indicate that either were unduly troubled by such situations. The police did arrest and prosecute some of the eighteen women and some of the male victims did also take out summonses against their attacker and occasionally ask in court for a separation—men did have recourse to the courts, and they did very occasionally use it. Given the number of violent women living in Stafford at this time, it is surprising that there were not more prosecutions of women for assaulting their male partners or more male victims taking out their own summonses. The incidence of female violence against male partners in a domestic context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Stafford is likely to have been much higher than the police, court and press records show.

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