Sexual Harassment, Victimhood and Affective Self-Fashioning in Victorian England: The Bolton Workhouse Scandal, 1889-1890

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Title: Sexual harassment, victimhood, and affective self-fashioning in Victorian England: The Bolton Workhouse Scandal, 1889-1890.

Abstract:

In 1889, the Lancashire cotton town of Bolton was rocked by a scandal that consumed the local, regional, and national press. Nurse Rose Morris, employed at Bolton's Fishpool Workhouse, purported to have letters detailing her sexual assault by members of the Board of Guardians — including the Mayor. This article explores how Morris negotiated her status as victim under intense public and institutional scrutiny, succeeding in gaining widespread public support for her cause despite her status as a 'fallen woman.' In so doing, the article demonstrates Morris' astute orchestration of a climate of suspicion surrounding the Guardians' boorish and evasive behaviour. The nurse's perspicacity affords a revealing insight into the gendering of emotional states in the past, and how these shaped notions of culpability within the legal process. Additionally, it reveals the underexamined muscle of the local press, whose support for Morris followed local campaigns against the sexual exploitation of women workers.

Key words: Sexual harassment, nursing, workhouse, scandal, professionalism, self-fashioning.

Addressing an extraordinary meeting of Bolton's Board of Guardians on 17 February 1890, Mayor of Bolton John Barrett, J.P., declared that he and his fellow board-members were victims of a 'foul, wicked and dastardly conspiracy.'¹ On 6 November 1889, Nurse Rose Morris, employed at Bolton's Fishpool Workhouse, had passed letters to her colleague, Dr John Marsh, alleging that 'immoral relations' had occurred between herself and certain

members of the Board — including the Mayor.² Suspending Morris from her post, the Local Government Board launched an inquiry to investigate the claims, which, if false, amounted to a criminal libel that could carry a lengthy prison sentence.³ Disastrously, however, the inquiry's commencement was interrupted by unexpected news: Nurse Morris died on 28 November 1889. The post-mortem revealed that a heart attack following her suspension had aggravated her already weak health. Worse, it stated she was pregnant, a revelation which drastically affected public opinion of the case, although the claim was subsequently retracted.⁴ In an act widely regarded as confirming their guilt, the Guardians took possession of the incriminating letters, promptly burning them.⁵ Popularly christened 'The Bolton Workhouse Scandal,' these events consumed the columns of local, regional, and national newspapers until the inquiry concluded by exonerating the Guardians on 12 February 1890. Yet the inquiry's reprieve could not restore public confidence in the Guardians, whose members struggled to gain re-election subsequently.⁶

Scandal played a vital role in Victorian Britain, providing a focal point for the articulation of broader cultural concerns about sexuality, gender relations, the moral integrity of elites, and abuses present in institutions such as the workhouse.⁷ Although scandals tarnished the reputations and ruined the prospects of men involved (M.P. Charles Dilke's political career never recovered after he was accused of adultery in the Crawford divorce of 1886), women tainted by it suffered more profound forms of social ostracism.⁸ Historians of sexual harassment and rape have noted that since the eighteenth century, female complainants like Rose Morris fell into a social and legal paradox, whereby the very act of asserting that they had been abused signalled their loss of sexual 'innocence,' wreaking havoc both with their testimony and reputations, reducing them to the status of prostitute in the public eye.⁹ Forced to confront economically-powerful and socially-influential male abusers locally, in the workplace, or at court, in the presence of neighbours and colleagues, women would have to

endure the experience of recounting in detail the attacks they had suffered with little hope of redress. As Shani D'Cruze notes, numerous situations arose 'which men exploited by forcing themselves sexually onto a girl or a woman who had agreed to social interaction' in Victorian Britain, where merely staying present in the same room as an abuser could be read as consent to sex, regardless of whether necessity or etiquette required it.¹⁰

Yet surprisingly, the Bolton Workhouse Scandal was marked by widespread popular support for Morris and contrasting condemnation towards the Guardians. What made this case different? As this article demonstrates, Morris' astute navigation of her status as a woman complainant indicates what I refer to as *structural literacy*; an ability to recognise and negotiate the often hostile social, cultural, legal, institutional, and affective structures by which, as a woman, she had little agency in creating in this era. Morris' deployment of letters — material evidence, as opposed to verbal testimony — as the means to make her case, and her restraint in refusing to discuss their details before the due process of the inquiry, empowered her to orchestrate a climate of suspicion around the Guardians. Initially managing the situation purely through inferring the letters' content, Morris was revealed to be an astute judge of character, as the Guardians' ill-considered remarks in meetings and general callousness in their attitudes towards Morris and Marsh (erstwhile respectable medical professionals until proven guilty), drew attention to the Guardians' comparative lack of judgement or emotional 'management' in response to the accusations.¹¹ After Morris enlisted Dr Marsh, to whom she gave the letters for safekeeping, and Mr. J.H. Hall, the pair's solicitor, Morris furnished her cause with supporters who risked their own class, gendered, and professional standing to act on her behalf, and who similarly refused to divulge the letters' contents.

By preventing full disclosure of the purported sexual liaisons to the public, Morris was thereby shielded from the kind of testimony that usually compromised victims in cases of

rape. In these scenarios, as D'Cruze notes, '...however neat and respectable she appeared in court, her own and other witnesses' descriptions of her disordered dress, her hair unfastened, brought contradictory representations of her into imaginative view,' pitfalls Morris was able to neatly avoid until her untimely death.¹² Morris' perspicacity affords a revealing insight into the gendering of emotional states in the past, and how these shaped notions of culpability within the legal process. Indeed, the 'wrong' response could create a 'topsy-turvy' situation, where men's and women's roles could be reversed if they were seen to express the affective reaction identified with the other.¹³ The Guardians' outspoken indignance, inappropriate use of humour, and outright anger towards Morris and Marsh displayed a lack of control over their emotions irreconcilable with their class, masculinity, and political standing in this period, and indeed, more commonly associated with criminal behaviours.¹⁴ As Julie-Marie Strange notes, even working-class men understood that their affective relationships and displays were intimately entwined with masculine forms of citizenship and labour in Victorian Britain. 'Restraint' and 'respectability' were important bywords for transmuting men's feelings of love and duty into the practices of hard work and appropriate conduct, especially towards the 'weaker sex,' that secured men's privileged access to more highly-skilled forms of work and political participation.¹⁵ The Bolton Guardians' passionate outbursts and ill-timed humour thus ironically placed them in the same boat as the majority of women, denied the right to vote because their 'unbridled' emotions were deemed incompatible with the rights and duties of full citizenship.¹⁶

Nurse Morris' character, actions, and ultimate demise undercut the usual public debates about female responsibility in official and personal relationships, enabling the local press to shape the direction of the inquiry in a manner that ran counter to official narratives. At each stage of the scandal's development the Local Government Board attempted to suppress the affair with the aid of their investigating officer, Inspector Henley. Defying these official manoeuvres, the

media fixated on issues of sexual and professional malpractice on the part of the Guardians, continually implicating them in Morris' death despite the Local Government Board's efforts to portray Nurse Morris and Dr Marsh as purveyors of a false and dangerous libel. In so doing, the case suggests the underexamined muscle of the Victorian local press.¹⁷ Ably dictating the dominant narrative of the inquiry and the opinions of regional and national publications, Bolton's media channelled the radical traditions of both the town and wider region of Lancashire.¹⁸ As Harry Cocks notes, late-nineteenth century Bolton boasted powerful trade unions to which its predominantly textile-manufacturing working-class population belonged, as well as a burgeoning reputation for socialism among local politicians.¹⁹ This was in keeping with broader currents of political unrest across Lancashire during the 1880s where, Jan Lambertz observes, strikes occurred at cotton factories and mills throughout the region after workers objected to the sexual exploitation of women spinners by foremen or employers. These incidents undoubtedly primed Bolton newspapers' perspectives prior to the workhouse scandal.²⁰

Such cases affirmed an existing culture of recognising and reacting to the harassment of female workers in the region during the years preceding 1889. Additionally, Morris' professional status as nurse also enhanced her agency. Along with teaching and secretarial work, nursing was one of a handful of jobs open to women in the late-Victorian period in which an ethos of 'professionalism' was foregrounded, as Arlene Young writes. Nursing endowed its practitioners with the qualities of 'a strong work ethic, an advanced level of general education, and specialized training,' elevating practitioners' class and gentility.²¹ Nursing gave opportunities for social advancement commonly denied to working-class women in other sectors. Famously, Harriet Coster, who started her working life as a housemaid, rose to become Matron of St. George's hospital, one of the most prestigious medical institutions in London, for twenty-five years from 1872-1897.²² Given the diverse

class backgrounds, breadth of medical training, and strict regulations that increasingly distinguished the profession, nurses' sexual availability could be less readily assumed than working-class women in other professions (for example, the factory girl or cotton weaver, who were popularly characterized as more 'brazen' and promiscuous in their dealings with men).²³

Victimhood during sex scandals was heavily conditioned by professional status and spatial context in Victorian England, yet both might still have proven ineffective means of eliciting sympathy had Morris not carefully strategized the production of the incriminating letters. Similar acumen to that displayed by Morris can be identified in the actions of numerous women who engaged (by choice or otherwise) in a 'public' role at the end of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century. Besides the efforts of those fighting for the suffrage, historians are increasingly encountering case studies that reveal structural literacy in the actions of individual women facing criminal prosecution without the machinery of a larger organisation behind them.²⁴ Christopher Hilliard's recent, extraordinary analysis of a case known as the 'Littlehampton Libels' in the 1920s beautifully deconstructs how one suspected libeller, a working-class woman, successfully modified her vocabulary, correspondence style, and behaviour to interact with police and officials, successfully deceiving them (and the public) as to her gentility for a number of years.²⁵ Morris, fashioning herself into a model of reticent feminine victimhood in the era before the interwar popularisation of psychology, demonstrated a historically-specific alertness to the restrained affective parameters in which she could publicise her abuse.²⁶ The Bolton Workhouse Scandal therefore offers an important case-study for exploring a strand of emotional enterprise among women not commonly assumed to exist in Victorian England, demonstrating a model of female agency expressed in a less visible, more complicated manner than that of the 'rebel women' more commonly

championed by feminist scholars.²⁷ It also serves as an important and unusual example of cooperation between local press and victim to hold upper-class male abusers to account.

I. An Emerging Scandal

The meeting held by the Bolton Board of Guardians on 6 November 1889 began in much the same vein as its predecessors. Reading out the returns of Fishpool Workhouse for the previous fortnight, the only matters of note were an incidence of scabies and the decision of the Board to detain and treat inebriates in the workhouse.²⁸ All other business concluded, Guardian Mr. Golding fatefully announced that ‘he had an application to make that morning which he hoped, in the interest of justice and fair play, might be granted.’²⁹ Golding had been shown letters by ‘an officer of the Workhouse’ that had allegedly been written by himself (Golding) and other guardians, containing ‘grave charges of impropriety’ with ‘an hospital nurse.’ Consequently, Golding requested that the Board apply immediately for a Local Government Board inquiry, a motion carried unanimously.³⁰

‘Impropriety’ was a term that, along with ‘seduction’ and ‘immorality’ or ‘immoral relations’, formed part of the Victorian lexicon for discussing cases of sexual assault and rape without having to use those words explicitly. As Kim Stevenson writes, ‘Such euphemistic metaphors and sanitized language both protected public morals and the individual morality of those involved in the case – not just the complainant but also jurors and legal professionals – as well as those reporting it, allowing all to express the nature of the violation without actually stating the fact of penetration.’³¹ Although the meaning of such terms would have usually been recognisable to the Victorian reader, these metaphors also served to augment the silence surrounding both consensual sex and the sexual abuse of women and children, whose mutual inability to access comparable sexual knowledge to men functioned as a tool to preserve the patriarchy.³² The constrained language available placed a hurdle in the path of

those wishing to report sexual assault, since their very explanation of what occurred might reveal an ‘inappropriate’ level of sexual knowledge.³³ As such, the presentation of Morris’ complaint in a letter format signalled an effort to circumvent a verbal interrogation that would smear her own character were she asked to describe the actions of her accusers in any detail. Further, her use of an intermediary to present the letters — Dr. Marsh — meant that Morris’ complaints were initially ventriloquized through a respectable male representative, cleverly re-gendering the usual male-versus-female configuration of opponents should the case enter a courtroom by ensuring that Morris’ statements would necessarily be echoed by her ‘protector’.

Significantly, this strategy held echoes of men’s roles in protesting sexual harassment of Bolton’s female workforce in the recent past. In 1886, the workforce of 170 men at Bolton’s Thomas and Joseph Heaton Mill had downed tools over three female workers hired as spinners, publicly citing the ‘morally dangerous’ conditions of the women’s relative isolation on an overwhelmingly male factory floor and causing the women to be moved.³⁴ As Lambertz notes, there was an element of ambiguity to the motives of the strikers involved. The strike was unsuccessful, and questions lingered over whether the men’s concerns were genuine or borne of the desire to prevent the employment of cheap female labour to the skilled roles in the mill (women workers’ voices were notably silent in the debate). As with the Bolton Workhouse Scandal, the Heaton Mill strike represents an instance where historians are forced to ‘read into’ the silence; in the latter case it was, however, the men’s appeals for the women’s ‘decency’ and ‘respectability’ to be preserved that accrued column inches in publications such as the *Cotton Times*.³⁵ In this sense, one can observe how the incident reinforced male workers’ ability to monopolise the discourse on women’s sexual vulnerability or agency in a way their women colleagues were denied, affording context to Morris’ decision to utilize the services of Dr. Marsh in her defence.

There was certainly little hope of Morris' allegations avoiding public notice. Regular accounts of the Bolton Board of Guardians' meetings were carried, verbatim, in the *Bolton Guardian*, *Bolton Evening News*, *Bolton Journal*, and *Bolton Chronicle*, circumstances of which Rose Morris must have been aware when bringing forth the allegations as she had been resident in Bolton since 1885.³⁶ Realising the potential for subsequent revelations, three of these newspapers — the *Bolton Evening News*, *Bolton Journal*, and *Bolton Chronicle* — printed their first reports under the sub-headings 'Scandal at the Workhouse' or 'A Workhouse Scandal,' only the *Guardian* adopting the more restrained 'Serious Charges Against Members of the Board.'³⁷ Since the editor of the *Bolton Guardian* was Thomas Cunliffe, the prominent Methodist, temperance campaigner, and local Justice of the Peace who inhabited the same social milieu as the Board, this hesitation was unsurprising.³⁸ Certainly, as Mayor Barrett proclaimed, the charges, if true, 'unfitted those accused not only to be Guardians, but justified them being hounded from respectable society,' a comment that was notably silent in regard to the repercussions for Morris' reputation. Barrett's warning not only outlined the reputational damage to Bolton's social elite, but also betrayed economic concerns. Scandal represented a financial menace to the Guardians, local businessmen and manufacturers whose trade in Bolton would suffer from their denunciation, and by extension, whose demise might impact the prosperity of the town itself. Foretold by the Mayor (himself among the Guardians accused), the prospect of their being 'hounded from society' suggested the burden that would henceforth rest on the Guardians' conduct, offering a tacit acknowledgement of the behavioural scrutiny that accompanied public office.

Poor Law Guardians were the subjects of popular mistrust throughout the nineteenth century. Prominent activist Louisa Twining, founder of the Workhouse Visiting Society, wrote in 1880 that Boards of Guardians embodied the 'weaknesses and pettiness of human nature,' alleging that:

... every one knows how far the elections of guardians is still from what it ought to be, and how probably, the majority offer themselves from some interested motive, connected with the contracts, or with “keeping down the rates.”³⁹

This was a plausible assessment of the Bolton Board, whose members included a barrister, hotel proprietor, oyster merchant, hosiery-manufacturer, printer-and-stationer, an estate agent, a draper, and a cotton-spinner (mill owner).⁴⁰ All had vested interests in controlling the level of spending on the poor relative to investment in other sectors in the prosperous manufacturing town. The propensity for exploiting their position was famously mocked in Charles Dickens’ definitive homily on the cruelty of the workhouse, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), which lampooned the ‘wise and humane regulations’ that saw Poor Law Guardians and workhouse officials starve the poor and segregate male paupers from their wives and children.⁴¹ One journalist even invoked this cultural reference during the Bolton Workhouse Scandal, lamenting that ‘the Bolton Board is treading in the steps of the august body described by Dickens in *Oliver Twist*.’⁴² The illicit sexual exploits of Poor Law Guardians thus constituted newspaper dynamite for local reporters, and to this must be added the sinister imaginative terrain of the workhouse itself, as powerful an agent in attracting readers as any human participant.

The workhouse’s ‘panoptic’ architecture, organised in a radial or octagonal shape with the master and mistress occupied a central ‘hub’ overlooking the exercise yard and outbuildings, closely resembled that of prisons, being designed to maximise scrutiny over the behaviour of its inhabitants. Ironically, this also rendered nurses (who spent most of their time in close quarters with those physically unable to labour) subject to similar kinds of near-constant surveillance.⁴³ Seth Koven has examined the lingering gaze directed at the workhouse poor, whose situation legitimised officials and middle-class visitors staring at their bodies and monitoring their age, weight, cleanliness, and interaction with other inmates. Comparably, nurses, whose corseted uniforms and care for others connoted a ‘powerful sexual symbol,’

were vulnerable to predatory glances in this space.⁴⁴ Morris, an unmarried woman aged twenty-eight years who had been employed since 1883 as an experienced Nurse on the men's wards at Rochdale and Bolton Infirmarys, Salford Union, and Fishpool Workhouse, could have held little hope of being regarded as lacking sexual knowledge or desire.⁴⁵ In consequence, her efforts to displace her testimony about her dealings with the Guardians onto the shoulders of her male colleague and solicitor all the more strikingly demonstrate her structural literacy, diverting those who sought direct access to her testimony within the broader institutional and legal structures within which they were bound.

II. Confronting Nurse Morris

On 20 November 1889 Morris faced the assembled Guardians — her alleged abusers — at a meeting described disapprovingly by Local Government Board Inspector Henley as a 'fishing inquiry.'⁴⁶ Condescendingly telling Morris that 'We just want to have a little talk with you, and ask you a few questions, and we hope you will kindly give us a definite answer,' Chairman John Wardle demanded repeatedly to know whether Morris had the letters, which she refused to confirm. Demurring firmly, Morris met appeals to her to admit even the existence of the letters with the rejoinder that 'I wish to be cautious and decline to answer any questions. I have put the matter into the hands of my solicitor, and it will be dealt with at the Inquiry ... I should like it to come before the Inquiry, and then, perhaps, the thing will come out satisfactorily.'⁴⁷ Morris' refusal was astute. As Carolyn Conley writes of Victorian women who alleged rape, 'Ruined by the loss of sexual innocence, women were also blamed for failing to protect their innocence from "normal" male impulses. A woman who brought a charge of sexual assault was making a public issue of her loss of virtue. Such brazenness was considered highly suspicious.'⁴⁸ The nurse's 'respectable' silence on matters sexual, whilst asserting the highly feminised desire for caution (notably taking the opportunity to label her own virtuous character traits for public benefit), shifted focus away from her 'brazenness' in

bringing the letters to wider attention in the first place. Simultaneously, she inferred the Guardians' comparatively 'risky' behaviour in interrogating her without Local Government Board approval, indicating their disregard for accepted tenets of both legal and masculine behaviour.

Morris' acumen was repaid by the local media coverage. Presented with Nurse Morris for the first time, journalists were uniformly complimentary about her, variously describing her as 'a tall, attractive-looking young lady' (*Bolton Journal*, *Bolton Evening News*) and 'a very ladylike young person' (*Bolton Chronicle*).⁴⁹ Local reporters thus immediately disposed their readers to look favourably upon the nurse, dignifying her with reference to her femininity and youth, and by the socially-respectable designation 'lady.' They also drew attention to her restrained comportment. The *Bolton Journal* commented on the 'low tone' in which she answered the Guardians' questions, and drew a tangible distinction with the Guardians' behaviour. Remarking at the beginning of the meeting upon the excellent testimonials Nurse Morris had received from her previous employers, clerk to the Guardians Simpson Cooper joked that 'So far as we can tell her abilities appear to have been very great,' an innuendo greeted with laughter by the Board and which was reported in the press.⁵⁰

Assumptions of culpability often hinged on such displays of affective (mis)management, especially in the Victorian courtroom where, as Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson observe,

Good or well-behaved men were expected to look, act and behave like Britons, to appear manly or, if social status warranted it, to be of gentlemanly appearance. Women were expected to be respectable and womanly, to be feminine and attractive, yet in a demure and modest, not provocative, fashion, and, if social status warranted it, to attract the symbolic attribution of being a lady or lady-like in conduct.⁵¹

Morris studiously avoided appearing too independent or comfortable in bringing her complaint to public notice, nor could she be framed as an overtly 'modern' woman

demanding sexual equality. These were traits that immediately soured press and officials' perceptions of women on trial in other high-profile criminal cases of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century.⁵² By contrast, compassionate representations of victims of rape and those forced into prostitution ('fallen women') increasingly featured in popular late-Victorian fiction, immortalised in the novels of Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Thomas Hardy.⁵³ It is especially pertinent to highlight these three authors because they were regular contributors to the *Bolton Evening News* and *Bolton Journal*, which, under the editorship of W.F. Tillotson, published many of the leading fictional works of the day.⁵⁴ Tillotson's columnists, with their repeated references to Morris as a 'lady,' created intertextual parallels between Rose Morris and these injured fictional heroines, beautiful, chaste young women who were ruined through the lascivious designs of aristocratic rakes, only to find redemption through death, religion or, at best, marriage to a heroic rescuer.⁵⁵

Unlike these fragile heroines, however, Morris did not lack agency. Not only had she volunteered the alleged sexual misdemeanours of the Board for Bolton's scrutiny, but by deferring to a solicitor, Morris commanded legal power over the employers to whom she was subject in the class, gender and institutional hierarchy of late-Victorian England. To locate this affront in context, Morris brought this scandal upon the Guardians' heads at a period when, as Steven King highlights, no women in Bolton had yet been successfully elected as Poor Law Guardians, nor would they until 1895.⁵⁶ Morris's auspices as heroine were undoubtedly improved by the Guardians' ill-considered and boorish conduct, reproduced extensively in the local press. Another telling exchange between the Board and Guardian Mr. Taylor emerged when Taylor's query whether to suspend the Guardians involved was met by the Board with laughter and cries of 'No, no.'⁵⁷ The Boards' inappropriate use of humour continued after Morris' death. In a meeting on the 18 December 1889, it was commented upon that 'none of the country Guardians are implicated,' (meaning those board members

who resided outside Bolton), a point swiftly turned to ridicule by Guardian Mr. Platt's quip that 'they are all lilywhite hens (renewed laughter).'⁵⁸

These jokes revealed a certain sexual braggadocio, insinuating the sexual impotence of the 'country' Guardians and doing little to dispel notions of the guilt of those accused. Humour, as Lucy Delap observes, has historically functioned as an assertion of power, frequently used by working-class servants as a tactic to puncture their masters' social superiority or give vent to political and social tensions. The Guardians' recourse to jokes may have sought similarly to retrieve their position, since historically 'Laughter operates as a site of the exercise of power in providing a means of naming, belittling, imitating, and making ridiculous.'⁵⁹ Yet it was difficult to reconcile the apparent security with which such jokes were made with Morris' recruitment of Marsh and Hall, a demonstration of solidarity between three members of the most highly esteemed professions — nurse, doctor, and solicitor — accessible to the middle classes. Similarly, Morris' professed faith in the outcome of the Inquiry registered her submission to the institutional body that governed the Board and another senior male figure, the Local Government Board Inspector. Although Morris' complaint disrupted power relations within the workhouse and in Bolton, her actions and restrained demeanour cleverly negotiated different levels of structural opposition to her allegations, providing a visible counterpoint to the Guardians' jocularity.

Morris' carefully-controlled reaction in the face of repeated grilling over the fate of the letters by those she accused of molesting her, and clear strategy for placing the outcome in the hands of a high-profile Inquiry, marked a deliberate deviation from prevailing wisdom about affective gender responses (the 'hysterical' woman) when set against her colleague's impetus to comply under the same pressure. Marsh, called in to face the Guardians after Morris, offered to hand over the letters after the Guardians asked him 'Have you in your possession or power letters given to you by Rose Morris, nurse at the Workhouse, impugning immoral

relations by some members of this Board with her?', which the solicitor Hall immediately refused on the grounds that Marsh would become liable, in submitting the letters, to the charge of having manufactured them himself. Hall demanded an indemnity be given to protect the doctor from legal prosecution for libel, illustrating Marsh's relative naivete about the danger in which he had placed himself in contrast to Morris's studied refusals. Suspending both doctor and nurse until the inquiry, the Guardians again vented their frustration; 'According to her own evidence,' declared Guardian Mr. Nightingale, 'Nurse Morris was not a proper person to be in their service, and considering the treatment both had given to the Board, he thought they ought to be suspended until the finish of the inquiry.'⁶⁰ For Morris, however, the meeting would be her final public appearance.

II. Post-Mortem

At four-thirty in the afternoon of 29 November 1889, Rose Catherine Morris died in her room at Fishpool Workhouse, from whence she had been too ill to leave since her suspension.⁶¹ Morris's death and subsequent post-mortem is notably absent from the records of the Bolton Board of Guardians. Their sole concession to the circumstance appeared in the entry for their meeting of 4 December 1889, which prefixed her name with the word 'late'.⁶² In London, the Local Government Board received communication of the news by telegraph on 30 November 1889 in a hurried summary directed to Edmund Wodehouse, Assistant Secretary to the President of the Board, reading

Bolton workhouse officers suspended enquire solicited the Nurse Morris died suddenly Thursday perhaps aneur [aneurism] but doctor refuses to certify consequently post mortem and inquest ordered two thirty today.⁶³

Local newspapers eagerly published news of the post-mortem, conducted by Dr Mallett. 'Fatted degeneration of the heart' was attributed to be the cause of death, but testimony from Morris's colleague, Nurse Alice Barnes Jones (who had recently resigned due to long hours

and ill health), added that news of Morris' suspension and dismissal from the workhouse had considerably worsened Morris's fragile health. The coroner charged the Board of Guardians with neglect on the grounds that Morris had not seen a doctor until the Friday prior to her death, and received no medical treatment for the duration of her illness. Finally, Mallett proffered the most scandalous information of all: Morris was three to four weeks pregnant at her death.⁶⁴

As Janet Fink and Katherine Holden assert, 'Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Britain, the figures of the spinster and unmarried mother have been positioned at opposite ends of a spectrum of female deviancy and have frequently been drawn upon as warnings to women who might be tempted to challenge social norms.'⁶⁵ Had Morris lived, she would perhaps have fallen foul of this formulation, as a nearly-thirty-year-old professional woman whose pregnancy was, by her own testimony, the result of encounters with multiple men (albeit allegedly forced). The discovery of Morris' condition on her death appeared to exonerate her in the public eye, however, especially given the uneven power relations operating in the workhouse, the spatial context of her demise.

Whether or not Morris had told the truth about the Guardians, she had been punished for compromising their reputations by medical neglect during severe illness, in a manner evocative of the worst tales of workhouse cruelty. The *Bolton Guardian* explicitly appealed to this tradition, weaving the workhouse environment into their report when describing how the inquest jury had journeyed 'through several intricate passages...passing through the sitting room of the deceased' to reach the bedroom where Morris lay dead.⁶⁶ The labyrinthine imagery of the workhouse interior not only crafted a sense of the nurse's isolation and vulnerability within the institution, but also recalled another famous national scandal surrounding the sexual exploitation of children in 1885. The *Pall Mall Gazette*'s renowned 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' series comparably invoked the Ancient Greek legend of

the Labyrinth of Daedalus (through which sacrificial children travelled to be devoured by the Minotaur) when elaborating the maze of streets and alleys in impoverished parts of London where children were trafficked.⁶⁷ Indeed, the white slave traffic and sexual assaults on women workers in industries including nursing and matchbox factories were topics that became increasingly entangled in national media reports during the 1880s and 1890s, both identified with the systemic abuse of power by upper-middle and upper-class men.⁶⁸

Following the coroner's conclusions, local journalists rained criticism upon the Bolton Guardians. Of Morris's death, acerbic *Bolton Guardian* columnist 'Hotspur' wrote

The close connection of the sad event with her appearance before the Board, at the instance of her opponents and evidently against her own wish, will prejudice the public all the more in her favour.⁶⁹

The *Bolton Journal* published the story next to reports on 'Two Men Poisoned,' 'The Southport Baby-Farming Case' (detailing the suspicious death of a child) and 'Wife Murders.'⁷⁰ Juxtaposing these stories together to create, as Judith Walkowitz has termed it, a 'proliferation of meaning' for the reader to interpret, Bolton's public were arguably made aware of the finger of guilt pointing at the Guardians.⁷¹ The *Bolton Evening News* pointedly printed its account of Rose Morris's death alongside an article on the 'Atherton Murder' (Figure 1). Visually, in both font size and frequency the word 'murder' obscured the verdict of 'death by natural causes' recorded at the inquest. For the first time, national media interest was evinced when the *Daily Telegraph* published a short account of events to date under the headline 'A SENSATIONAL CASE.'⁷² Avoiding detailing the nature of the allegations, the *Telegraph* commented that 'she [Morris] had brought grave charges against certain members of the Board ... Sensational disclosures are, it is alleged, expected at the inquest.'⁷³ Refraining from any indication that Morris was culpable, the article was featured directly beneath an update on the Bury Murder case, an editorial decision that suggests the *Telegraph*

was keen to follow the example set by local newspapers. Channelling the tone of reports upwards from local to national coverage, rather than vice-versa, the escalation of the Bolton Workhouse Scandal in this manner supports recent scholarship by John Benson, who significantly contends that a 'trickle-down' model of sensational reportage undermines the independence of the provincial press in the late-Victorian era.⁷⁴

Rumour and gossip had tangible, material consequences in Victorian England, especially for those whose livelihoods were precarious. Attempting to cast doubt on Marsh's credibility, the *Guardians* asserted during their next meeting that

...the whole of the circumstances appear to the Board to point to material complicity in reference to the letters referred to, and matters in connection therewith between Dr. Marsh the Medical Officer and the late Rose Morris and which should have the promptest and fullest investigation.⁷⁵

The *Guardians* also requested that the Workhouse Committee send them a record of the absences by leave of Morris during the previous three months.⁷⁶ Claiming that doctor and nurse were somehow 'complicit' in creating the letters, and requiring details of Morris' movements outside the workhouse, the *Guardians* attempted to insinuate a relationship between Morris and Marsh, deflecting the allegations of sexual misconduct from themselves. Again, though, the power of the existing media prejudice against the *Guardians*' shone through in the response of the Local Government Board to these efforts. A letter from Local Government Inspector J.J. Henley to Edmund Wodehouse on 15 December warned that 'I hope that the [Local Government] Board will at once refuse to accept the terms of the resolution, which really amounts to an inquiry into the conduct of a dead woman.'⁷⁷ Henley's blunt assessment indicates an ongoing internal critique of the *Guardians*' behaviour and an institutional move to suppress further un-masculine displays of petty muck-raking. Moreover, the nurse's death created a more complicated scenario for the inquiry than the *Guardians* appeared aware, since her limited testimony had given no voice to the sexual knowledge or

consent usually required to dismiss a woman's accusation of rape in a courtroom context.⁷⁸ Henley's colleagues agreed with his assessment. In an open letter to the Local Government Board, Wodehouse concurred 'I feel very strongly with Mr. Henley as to what is due to the late nurse,' while another, who merely signed the initials 'G.R.,' ordered that 'the subject should be pursued solely from the point of view of the conduct medical officer and not of the nurse who is now dead.'^{79 80}

III. An Inspector Calls.

Unfortunately for Henley, Morris's death simplified the local media narrative into a classic paradigm of victim and oppressor(s). Describing Morris in the aftermath of the post mortem, the *Bolton Journal* called her 'a frail and erring victim,' and admonished that 'it is true that the woman went wrong... but some man has gone wrong too, if there be not more than one.'⁸¹ Mr. Golding's examination formed the main substance of the inquiry's first day, and quickly supplied journalists with fodder for their headings by the admission that the Guardians implicated had burned the letters after Morris' death, ostensibly at the behest of Mr. Hall, Marsh's solicitor. 'Hissing' and 'a great sensation' from all gathered reportedly greeted this news.⁸² The destruction of the letters eclipsed even news from the coroner stating that further examination of the 'ovum' found in Morris's womb had discovered that the matter was some other substance of 'indeterminate' character, indicating she had not been pregnant.⁸³ As 'Hotspur' wrote, 'Short of a direct acknowledgement of guilt, there is hardly anything they [the Guardians] could have done more damaging to their case.'⁸⁴ On 12 February 1890, Henley rejoined the Guardians and delivered his verdict. The Local Government Board absolved the Guardians from all misconduct, and required Dr. Marsh to resign.⁸⁵

Regional and national reports presented the scandal in its full detail, from the original admission of the letters' existence through to the inquiry.⁸⁶ Much to the chagrin of Bolton's

residents (who regarded the scandal as ‘a blot on the reputation of the town’), ‘Bolton Workhouse’ featured in every headline.⁸⁷ Indeed, the ‘hissing’ and ‘great sensation’ with which the audience reportedly responded to the burning of the letters suggests a collective emotional investment in the outcome of a scandal that was, if temporarily, synonymous with the town’s name and national reputation, reinforcing the links between affective (dis)composure and the direction of an Inquiry that might negatively impact Bolton’s political and economic standing. The *Manchester Times* juxtaposed the scandal on a page with no less than eleven murders, one mysterious death, and two deaths through malpractice, signalling their fixation with the nature of Morris’s death.⁸⁸ The press reaction to Mallett’s retraction of Morris’s pregnancy was stark. Instead of vindicating the Guardians from sexual involvement with Morris, the *Bolton Evening News* and *Bolton Journal* focussed on the Guardians’ hesitation to Mallett’s letter in a series of related sub-headings. ‘Mr. Ramsden Deprecates Delay,’ referred to Guardian Mr. Ramsden’s plea to have the letter read. ‘What had the Board to fear?’ was superimposed above Mr. Taylor’s query that if the letter was in Morris’s favour, ‘why should they object to the letter being read?’ The *Journal*’s anonymous columnist described the Guardians’ debate as a ‘demoralised discussion,’ one of a number which had ‘demonstrated to the world their total lack of dignity, business acumen, and discretion.’⁸⁹

Such comments betrayed the extent to which misgivings about the Guardians’ sexual and professional morality, and lack of emotional control during the early days of the scandal, were shaped by pragmatic concerns over the elision of their integrity and Bolton’s financial reputation. As Peter Shapeley writes, ‘notions of care, benevolence, and Christian duty’ were central qualities for middle- and upper-middle class men to display leadership in Victorian urban centres such as Manchester and Bolton, where social and moral capital was identified with good business acumen.⁹⁰ Morris’s not being pregnant hardly amounted to conclusive proof that she had never had sex with the Guardians, nor that they had raped her; Guardian

Mr. Ellison rephrased this somewhat crudely when observing that Morris had by her own admission ‘made herself a wanton and a prostitute,’ in yet another outburst that did little to vindicate its author.⁹¹ Yet just three days after the verdict of the Inquiry was announced, on 15 February 1890, the *Bolton Journal* printed a supplementary article entitled ‘The Guardians and their Doings: An ‘Open’ Diary,’ listing the Guardians’ unscrupulous actions to date chronologically (Figure 2). The entry for 6th December described ‘The letters severally burnt by the implicated Guardians,’ concluding with the complaint that ‘The Inspector refused to allow questions as to the conduct of the implicated Guardians.’⁹² A proposed further inquiry was vetoed by the Guardians, incurring the wrath of even more commentators. ‘Hotspur’ attacked the Guardians in every *Bolton Guardian* ‘Town Talk’ article between 15 February and 1 March 1890, expostulating that ‘The pressure of public indignation should force the Board to fulfil their pledge of a further Inquiry or sweep them all from office.’ The *Bolton Chronicle* also continued to make jibes at the Guardians, subtitling an article ‘Don’t Burn that Letter’ when publishing the Guardians’ receipt of Dr Marsh’s resignation.⁹³

Ultimately, the institutional structures of Local Government enabled the Guardians to retain their power in principle, if suffering a temporarily-diminished reputation in practice. Exploiting the triennial system of Poor Law elections, in which only one-third of Guardians were required to retire from office each year, only one implicated Guardian — William Golding — offered to resign and stand for re-election. The election results were published on 16 April 1890. Golding failed to be re-elected.⁹⁴ Golding’s expulsion illustrates that the press’s opinion of the scandal was appropriated into the shared cultural consciousness of Bolton’s voters, highlighting the significance of this case study for historians’ assessment of the very real power and independence of the local press — particularly in regions where a history of radicalism enhanced local support for workers’ rights under trade unions.

Conclusion

Rose Morris' impact on Bolton was relatively short-lived. Her allegations of abuse could never be finally verified; Marsh and Hall, who she had enlisted as advocates, found themselves swiftly excluded from positions of influence following Morris' death. As an individual complainant rather than an affiliate of a larger activist organisation such as the suffragettes, Morris' battle has received no previous scholarly attention, nor been elevated in local popular memory as a contributing factor in the empowerment of women in other areas of political and social advancement. However, her structural literacy in cleverly negotiating accepted codes of Victorian femininity and victimhood, while simultaneously creating the conditions for the Board of Guardians to demonstrate to the world their subversion of ideals of masculine chivalry and restraint, strongly suggests a more nuanced form of agency exerted through realising the affective contours of gendered courtroom participation and deflecting those behaviours identified with culpability, as well as sexual knowledge. There are, of course, limitations to the extent to which historians can access the decision-making processes of a woman such as Morris, whose fleeting presence in the historical record requires one to make certain logical assumptions about agency based partly on the broader discourse surrounding sexual assault allegations of which, it is inferred, she was aware. Attracting widespread media coverage, such incidents formed part of a national conversation on expected codes of behaviour towards professional women in late-Victorian England. However fragmentary, incidents such as these laid the groundwork for future feminist organisations to demand greater recognition of gendered discrimination in the 'public' spaces women increasingly occupied in this era, and illustrate significant local and regional differentiation in the treatment of women complainants.

¹ 'Workhouse Scandal', *Bolton Journal* (22 February 1890), p. 8.

² Bolton Local Archives (hereafter BLA): GBO/1/24, *Bolton Board of Guardians' Minute Books*, 15 February 1889-9 April 1890, 'Meeting of the Guardians of the Poor at Bolton Union,' (6 November, 1889), p. 440.

³ As Christopher Hilliard notes, during the nineteenth century criminal charges for libel fell into three categories, the second of which 'involved public institutions and their integrity' — including those who denounced Judges or the behaviour of other public officials. Although most libel actions were increasingly tried as civil proceedings, those that involved public order in some way (such as the Bolton Workhouse Scandal, where press interest achieved national levels and tainted the reputations of both Guardians and their families) could still be tried as criminal cases resulting in two years' imprisonment. Christopher Hilliard, *The Littlehampton Libels: A Miscarriage of Justice and a Mystery about Words in 1920s England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 49-51.

⁴ Rose Morris died on 28 November 1889. See 'The Workhouse Scandal,' *Bolton Evening News* (29 November, 1889), p. 5; No records of the post-mortem survive, but the results were reproduced exhaustively in the press: 'The Workhouse Scandal,' *Bolton Guardian* (7 December, 1889), p. 3; 'The Late Nurse Morris,' *Bolton Evening News* (16 January, 1890), p. 3.

⁵ 'The Letters Destroyed,' *Bolton Guardian* (20 December 1889), p. 4.

⁶ BLA: GBO/1/24, *Bolton Board of Guardians' Minute Books*, 15 February 1889-9 April 1890, entry (12 February 1890), p. 510; 'Adjourned Meeting,' (17 February 1890), pp. 513-514.

⁷ ⁷ See, for example, Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Inc., 1976), 117-130; collected articles in Kristine Ottesen Garrigan (ed.), *Victorian Scandals: Representations of Gender and Class* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 81-120; Trevor Fisher, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995); Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 27-33; Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 106-126; Garrard, John, "Scandals: An Overview," in John Garrard and James L. Newell (eds.), *Scandals in Past and Contemporary Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 13-29.

⁸ Walkowitz, *City*, pp. 81-120.

⁹ Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770-1845*, (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 46-52.

¹⁰ Shani D'Cruze, 'Sex, Violence, and Local Courts: Working-Class Respectability in a Mid-Nineteenth Century Lancashire Town,' *British Journal of Criminology* 39:1 (1999), pp. 46-7.

¹¹ 'Emotional management' is a term coined by William Reddy, who explores the anthropological observation of associations between emotional restraint, political leadership, and masculinity in a wide range of Western societies historically. William Reddy, 'Emotional liberty: Politics and history in the anthropology of emotions,' *Cultural Anthropology* 14:2 (1999), p.271.

¹² D'Cruze, 'Sex, Violence, and Local Courts,' p. 51.

¹³ Laura Doan, 'Topsy-turveydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War,' *GLQ*, 12:4 (2006), 517-542.

¹⁴ Martin Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 193-204.

¹⁵ Julie-Marie Strange, 'Fatherhood, Providing, and Attachment in Late Victorian and Edwardian Working-Class Families,' *Historical Journal* 55:4 (2012), pp. 1007-1027.

¹⁶ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex, and Morality* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2001), pp. 71-78.

¹⁷ John Benson has also made this argument in his case study of a Victorian murder in Wolverhampton. John Benson, 'Calculation, Celebrity and Scandal,' *Journalism Studies* 10:6 (2009), pp. 837-850.

¹⁸ Harry Cocks, 'Calamus in Bolton: Spirituality and Desire in Late Victorian England,' *Gender and History* 13:2 (2001), pp. 195-6.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 196.

²⁰ Jan Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment in the Nineteenth-Century English Cotton Industry,' *History Workshop Journal* 19 (1985), pp. 29-61.

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- ²⁶ Houlbrook, 'Commodifying the Self-Within.'
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- ²⁹ *Bolton Guardian* (6 November 1889), p. 4.
- ³⁰ Ibid; BLA: GBO/1/24, *Bolton Board of Guardians' Minute Books, 15 February 1889-9 April 1890*, entry (6 November 1889), p. 440.
- ³¹ Kim Stevenson, 'Outrageous Violations: Enabling Students to Interpret Nineteenth Century Newspaper Reports of Sexual Assault and Rape,' *Law, Crime, and History* 4:1 (2014), p. 45.
- ³² Louise Jackson, '"Singing Birds as well as Soap Suds": The Salvation Army's Work with Sexually Abused Girls in Edwardian England,' *Gender & History* 12:1 (2000), p. 107; Adrian Bingham, Lucy Delap, Louise Jackson, and Louise Settle, 'Historical child sexual abuse in England and Wales: the role of historians,' *History of Education* 45:4 (2016), pp. 412-416.
- ³³ In a recent essay on the physical signifiers of 'chastity' and social construction of feminine 'virtue' within medical testimony of rape in Victorian Britain, historian Victoria Bates argues that 'After puberty females were not thought to be asexual, but only respectable women were thought sufficiently modest to control and hide their sexual feelings. Women who failed to do so lost their claim to respectability and, by extension, to victimhood.' Victoria Bates, *Sexual Forensics in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 85.
- ³⁴ Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment,' pp. 43-4.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ BLA: GBO/28/19, Letter no. 72874B, 'Appointment of Rose Morris as Nurse in Place of Hill, Sanctioned by L.G.B.A.,' (13 October 1885).
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- ⁴⁴ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 25-70; Jane Brooks and Anne Marie Rafferty, 'Dress and Distinction in Nursing, 1860-1939: "A Corporate (as well as corporeal) Armour of Probity and Purity,' *Women's History Review* 16:1 (2007), p. 42.
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- ⁵⁰ TNA: MH12/5644, 'Shorthand Notes,' (20 November 1889), in *Bolton Union Correspondence*, No. 209, (1889, November/December), p. 5.
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