# Women killers in Early Modern Britain faced brutal punishments and social stigma



In Early Modern Britain, between the 16th and 17th centuries, acts of lethal violence committed by women—though rare—were notably severe and often borne from circumstances of abuse and hardship, according to historian and former policewoman Blessin Adams. Her new book, *Thou Savage Woman: Female Killers in Early Modern Britain*, delves deeply into documented cases of women who committed murder, drawing from contemporary witness accounts and court records to illuminate their stories.

One of the most infamous cases involved Alice Arden of Faversham, Kent, who in 1551 conspired with neighbours and her lover to murder her husband, Thomas Arden. Described as "yoong, tall, and well favoured of shape and counternance," Alice was married to an unpopular merchant but sought to be with her father’s tailor servant. After multiple failed attempts, Thomas Arden was finally killed in a brutal attack involving a cloth wrapped tightly around his face and a fourteen-pound pressing iron used to strike him, before his body was stabbed repeatedly and abandoned in the snow. Alice inserted her lover’s dagger into the corpse as a demonstration of her animosity. Found guilty of “petty treason,” the term for killing one’s spouse, Alice was burned at the stake—a punishment reserved for women, while men were typically hanged.

Adams writes, “The sex of the person condemned decided their punishment: men were hanged, women were burned at the stake. While petty treason was a law that encompassed both sexes, in practice it was used to subjugate and punish women with far greater force than was used against men.” She explains that female violence was seen as a disturbing aberration threatening domestic stability, whereas male violence was tolerated as a social necessity.

The murder of Alice Arden entered the cultural consciousness through pamphlets and was dramatised in the 1592 play *Arden of Faversham*. Other cases highlighted by Adams reveal a pattern of desperate women resorting to murder to escape abusive or neglectful husbands. For instance, in 1602 Elizabeth Caldwell attempted to poison her largely absent husband Thomas by lacing his favourite cakes with arsenic. Although Thomas survived after consuming multiple cakes, others in the household, including children, fell gravely ill and one neighbour’s daughter died. Caldwell was sentenced to death.

Margaret Fernseed, a brothel owner near the Tower of London, was accused in 1607 of stabbing her husband in the throat despite scant evidence. Her execution followed her public branding as an adulteress and “abhomination.” Similarly, Elizabeth Husbands from Ibstock, Leicestershire, was found guilty in 1684 of poisoning her husband, but before execution she confessed to having also murdered her mother, fellow servant, and rejected suitor. Her crimes were attributed to possession by an evil spirit.

The harsh penalties for female poisoners were historically extreme. Under Henry VIII’s 1530 “Act for Poisonyng,” those convicted of poisoning were “boiled to death.” Richard Roose was executed in this gruesome manner in London’s Smithfield in 1531, serving as a stark warning to others. The law was repealed by Edward VI, Henry’s successor.

The book also recounts the case of Leticia Wigington, a seamstress in Ratcliffe, London, who, burdened with raising three children alone, hired apprentices and was paid by their parents. One apprentice, 13-year-old Elizabeth Houlton, was accused of theft and subjected to horrific punishment at Wigington’s behest. Elizabeth was whipped for hours until her blood flowed, and her wounds were salted to intensify her pain. She died three days later from her injuries. Wigington was convicted and executed at Tyburn in 1681. Adams notes, “Leticia was viewed as the principal actor in this terrible murder, while [the lodger] John’s part was diminished to that of a mindless accessory… Leticia’s role in the torture and murder of her young apprentice was considered to be even more outrageous, frightening and disturbing because she was a woman.”

Female victims of domestic abuse had little legal protection during this period. Mary Hobry, a midwife from France who lived in England, suffered regular physical abuse from her husband. In 1688, driven by fury, she killed him while he was drunk, dismembered his body, and disposed of the parts in public latrines and dung heaps. She publicly condemned her husband’s character but was nevertheless convicted of petty treason and burnt at the stake.

*Thou Savage Woman* is published by Harper Collins and is available through the Mail Bookshop. The book provides a detailed exploration of female criminality in Early Modern Britain, highlighting how these women’s actions and their subsequent punishments reflected broader societal anxieties about gender and order in this historical period.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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