

A licence to kill

A uniquely female ploy to rebuff a murder charge is the plea of 'delayed self-defence'. This is the invented notion that whereas men cool down over time, women instead boil over. Underpinning this is the equally bogus concept that what makes females peculiarly fume over a longer timeframe is 'cumulative provocation'. Of course, this allows women to premeditate murder at a juncture when the spouse has dropped his guard and can't use his strength to restrain her. The legal system now actively justifies and thereby encourages this. A string of women convicted of murder for killing their husbands whilst they slept and/or poisoning them all had their sentences reduced to manslaughter through 'diminished responsibility'.

The most famous of these women, Sara Thornton, drugged her husband Malcolm to sleep before knifing him to death. Convicted of murder, when re-tried on the basis of the new defence, she claimed that it was not her husband but herself who was the victim, with a supposed history of 'battery'. Yet no evidence was presented in court to substantiate this and Malcolm's relatives were certain that he was in no way violent. His first wife said Sara's release was 'a licence for any woman to kill her husband and say whatever she wants to say about him after he's dead.' Even Sara's own father and step-mother were against her.

It was clear that not only was there delay between any provocation and the murder, but also premeditation. Four days before the murder, Sara told a colleague that she was going to kill Malcolm, and she had fed him a meal laced with tranquilisers. Just hours before the crime she had scrawled in lipstick, 'Bastard Thornton, I hate you' on the bedroom mirror. There was a clear precipitating event: Malcolm had told her he wanted a divorce; his son was testifying that she feared that she might lose the house and money.

All of the women whose cases were re-examined were acquitted. Carol Peters drugged her husband and then stabbed him 39 times; Pamela Sainsbury strangled her husband with a rope while he was sleeping; Zoorah Shah administered a fatal dose of arsenic; Josephine Smith shot her sleeping husband in the head; and Kiranjit Ahluwalia burned her husband alive in his bed.

