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The criminal type in women and its atavistic origin

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[...]
[A] comparison of the criminal skull with the skulls of normal women reveals the fact that female criminals approximate more to males, both criminal and normal, than to normal women, especially in the superciliary arches in the seam of the sutures, in the lower jaw-bones, and in peculiarities of the occipital region. They nearly resemble normal women in their cheek-bones, in the prominence of the crotaphitic line, and in the median occipital fossa. There are also among them a large proportion (9.2 per cent) of virile crania.

The anomalies more frequent in female criminals than in prostitutes are: enormous pterygoid apophysis; cranial depressions; very heavy lower jaw; plagio-cephalia; the soldering of the atlas with the occiput; enormous nasal spine; deep frontal sinuses; absence of sutures; simplicity of sutures; wormian bones.

Fallen women, on the other hand, are distinguished from criminals by the following peculiarities: clinoid apophysis forming a canal; tumefied parietal prominences; median occipital fossa of double size; great occipital irregularity; narrow or receding forehead; abnormal nasal bones; epactal bone; prognathous jaw and alveolar prognathism; cranial sclerosis; a virile type of face; prominent cheek-bones. [...] More instructive than a mere analytical enumeration of the characteristics of degeneration is a synthesis of the different features peculiar to the female criminal type.

We call a *complete type* one wherein exist four or more of the characteristics of degeneration; a *half-type* that which contains at least three of these; and *no type* a countenance possessing only one or two anomalies or none.

Out of the female delinquents examined 52 were Piedmontese in the prison of Turin, and 234 in the Female House of Correction were natives of different Italian provinces, especially from the South. In these, consequently, we set aside all special characteristics belonging to the ethnological type of the different regions, such as the brachycephali of the Piedmontese, the dolichocephali of the Sardinians, the oxycephali.

We studied also from the point of view of type the 150 prostitutes whom we had previously examined for their several features; as well as another 100 from Moscow whose photographs Madame Tarnowsky sent us.

[...]

The results of the examination may be thus summarized:

1 The rarity of a criminal type in the female as compared with the male delinquent. In our homogeneous group (286) the proportion is 14 per cent, rising, when all other observations are taken into account, to 18 per cent, a figure lower almost by one-half than the average in the male born criminal, namely, 31 per cent.

In normal women this same type is only present in 2 per cent.

[...]

2 Prostitutes differ notably from female criminals in that they offer so much more frequently a special and peculiar type. Grimaldi's figures are 31 per cent (of anomalies), Madame Tarnowsky's 43 per cent, our own 38 per cent; making a mean of 37.1 per cent. These results harmonize with the conclusions to which we had already arrived in our study of particular features, and our survey of the various types of born prostitutes as distinguished from ordinary female offenders.

3 In the differentiation of female criminals, according to their offences, our last observations on the 286 criminals (made first without knowing the nature of their crimes and classified afterwards) give the prevalence of the criminal type among thieves as 15.3 and 16 per cent; among assassins as 13.2 per cent, and as rising to 18.7 per cent in those accused of corruption, among whom were included old prostitutes.

The least frequency was among swindlers, 11 per cent, and infanticides, 8.7 per cent, such women being indeed among the more representative of occasional criminals. [...]

Here we see the crescendo of the peculiarities as we rise from moral women, who are most free from anomalies, to prostitutes, who are free from none, and we note how homicides present the highest number of multiple anomalies.

All the same, it is incontestable that female offenders seem almost normal when compared to the male criminal, with his wealth of anomalous features.

[...]

The remarkable rarity of anomalies (already revealed by their crania) is not a new phenomenon in the female, nor is it in contradiction to the undoubted fact that atavistically she is nearer to her origin than the male, and ought consequently to abound more in anomalies.

We saw, indeed, that the crania of male criminals exhibited 78 per cent of anomalies, as against 27 per cent in female delinquents and 51 per cent in prostitutes; but we also saw that the monstrosities in which women abound are forms of disease, consequent on disorder of the ovule. But when a departure from the norm is to be found only in the physiognomy, that is to say, in that portion of the frame where the degenerative stamp, the type declares itself, then even in cases of idiocy, of madness, and, what is more important for our purpose, of epilepsy, the characteristic face is far less marked and less frequent in the woman. In her, anomalies are extraordinarily rare when compared with man; and this phenomenon, with a few exceptions among lower animals, holds good throughout the whole zoological scale.

[...]

Atavism helps to explain the rarity of the criminal type in woman. The very precocity of prostitutes – the precocity which increases their apparent beauty – is primarily attributable to atavism. Due also to it is the virility underlying the female criminal type; for what we look for most in the female is femininity, and when we find the opposite in her we conclude as a rule that there must be some anomaly. And in order to understand the significance and the atavistic origin of this anomaly, we have only to remember that virility was one of the special features of the savage women.

The criminal being only a reversion to the primitive type of his species, the female criminal necessarily offers the two most salient characteristics of primordial woman, namely, precocity and a minor degree of differentiation from the male – this lesser differentiation manifesting itself in the stature, cranium, brain, and in the muscular strength which she possesses to a degree so far in advance of the modern female.

[...]

The analogy between the anthropology and psychology of the female criminal is perfect.

Just as in the mass of female criminals possessing few or unimportant characteristics of degeneration, we find a group in whom these features are almost more marked and more numerous than in males, so while the majority of female delinquents are led into crime either by the suggestion of a third person or by irresistible temptation, and are not entirely deficient in the moral sense, there is yet to be found among them a small proportion whose criminal propensities are more intense and more perverse than those of their male prototypes.

'No possible punishments,' wrote Corrado Celto, an author of the fifteenth century, 'can deter women from heaping up crime upon crime. Their perversity of mind is more fertile in new crimes than the imagination of a judge in new punishments.'

'Feminine criminality,' writes Rykèrè, 'is more cynical, more depraved, and more terrible than the criminality of the male.'

'Rarely is a woman wicked, but when she is she surpasses the man' (Italian Proverb).

'The violence of the ocean waves or of devouring flames is terrible. Terrible is poverty, but woman is more terrible than all else' (Euripides).

'The perversity of woman is so great,' says Caro, 'as to be incredible even to its victims.'

[...] Another terrible point of superiority in the female born criminal over the male lies in the refined, diabolical cruelty with which she accomplishes her crime. [...] We may assert that if female born criminals are fewer in number than the males, they are often much more ferocious.

What is the explanation? [...] [T]he normal woman is naturally less sensitive to pain than a man, and compassion is the offspring of sensitiveness. If the one be wanting, so will the other be.

We also saw that women have many traits in common with children; that their moral sense is deficient; that they are revengeful, jealous, inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty.

In ordinary cases these defects are neutralized by piety, maternity, want of passion, sexual coldness, by weakness and an undeveloped intelligence. But when a morbid activity of the psychological centres intensifies the bad qualities of women, and induces them to seek relief in evil deeds; when piety and maternal sentiments are wanting, and in their place are strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies, much muscular strength and a superior intelligence for the conception and execution of evil, it is clear that the innocuous semi-criminal present in the normal woman must be transformed into a born criminal more terrible than any man.

What terrific criminals would children be if they had strong passions, muscular strength, and sufficient intelligence; and if, moreover, their evil tendencies were exasperated by a morbid psychological activity! And women are big children; their evil tendencies are more numerous and more varied than men's, but generally remain latent. When they are awakened and excited they produce results proportionately greater.

Moreover, the born female criminal is, so to speak, doubly exceptional, as a woman and as a criminal. For criminals are an exception among civilized people, and women are an exception among criminals, the natural form of retrogression in women being prostitution and not crime. The primitive woman was impure rather than criminal.

As a double exception, the criminal woman is consequently a monster. Her normal sister is kept in the paths of virtue by many causes, such as maternity, piety, weakness, and when these counter influences fail, and a woman commits a crime, we may conclude that her wickedness must have been enormous before it could triumph over so many obstacles.

[...]

M. R., a case described by Ottolenghi, was a thief, a prostitute, a corrupter of youth, a blackmailer, and all this at the age of 17. When only 12 she robbed her father in order to have money to spend among her companions. At 15 she fled from home with a lover, whom she left almost at once for a career of prostitution. With a view to larger gains, when only 16 she organized a vast system of prostitution, by

which she provided young girls of 12 and 15 for wealthy men, from whom she exacted large sums, of which only a few sous went to the victims. And by threats of exposure she managed to levy costly blackmail on her clients, one of whom, a highly placed functionary, was dismissed from his post in consequence of her revelations. She was extremely vindictive, and committed two crimes of revenge which serve to show the strange mixture of ferocity and cunning composing her character. One of her companions having spoken evil of her, she (who was then only 16 years of age) let a little time pass, then coaxed her enemy to accompany her outside the gates of the town. They reached a deserted spot as evening fell, and M. R. suddenly threw the other girl on the ground, and while recalling her offence proceeded to beat her violently with a pair of scissors and a key, nor desisted until her victim had fainted; after which she quietly returned to town. 'You might have killed her,' somebody said. 'What did that matter?' she replied; 'there was nobody to see.' 'You might have employed a hired assassin.' 'I am afraid of those,' was the answer. 'Besides, on principle one should do things oneself.' 'But with a key you could never have killed her' (went on the other). 'If one beats the temples well,' M. R. replied, 'it is quite possible to kill a person even with a key.'

She conceived on another occasion such a violent hatred to a brilliant rival that, enticing her into a café, she furtively poisoned her coffee and thus caused her death.

It would be difficult to find greater wickedness at the service of a vindictive disposition and an unbridled greed. We may regard M. R. as an instance in which the two poles of depravity were united. That is to say, she was sanguinary (for she went about always with a dagger in her pocket, and stabbed anybody who offended her in the least) and at the same time inclined to commit the more cautious and insidious crimes, such as poisoning, blackmail, etc. And we consequently find in her an example of the law we have already laid down, to the effect that the female born criminal, when a complete type, is more terrible than the male.

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Causes of criminal behavior

Enrico Ferri

When a crime is committed in some place, attracting public attention either through the atrocity of the case or the strangeness of the criminal deed – for instance, one that is not connected with bloodshed, but with intellectual fraud – there are at once two tendencies that make themselves felt in the public conscience. One of them, pervading the overwhelming majority of individual consciences, asks: How is this? What for? Why did that man commit such a crime? This question is asked by everybody and occupies mostly the attention of those who do not look upon the case from the point of view of criminology. On the other hand, those who occupy themselves with criminal law represent the other tendency, which manifests itself when acquainted with the news of this crime. This is a limited portion of the public conscience, which tries to study the problem from the standpoint of the technical jurist. The lawyers, the judges, the officials of the police, ask themselves: What is the name of the crime committed by that man under such circumstances? Must it be classed as murder or patricide, attempted or incompleated manslaughter, and, if directed against property, is it theft, or illegal appropriation, or fraud? And the entire apparatus of practical criminal justice forgets at once the first problem, which occupies the majority of the public conscience, the question of the causes that led to this crime, in order to devote itself exclusively to the technical side of the problem, which constitutes the juridical anatomy of the inhuman and antisocial deed perpetrated by the criminal.

In these two tendencies you have a photographic reproduction of the two schools of criminology. The classic school, which looks upon the crime as a juridical problem, occupies itself with its name, its definition, its juridical analysis, leaves the personality of the criminal in the background and remembers it only so far as exceptional circumstances explicitly stated in the law books refer