Class, gender, and religious biases shaped the perspectives and evidence presented in portrayals of the murder in 1895 of a 30-year-old woman in Montreal. Different primary sources offered varying descriptions of the case, revolving around whether or not the victim, Mélina Massé, had been murdered by her allegedly abusive husband. This study draws on coverage in a variety of newspapers (including sketches of court scenes), two musical drama leaflets, and the defence lawyer’s response to reveal the venues for public voices in turn-of-the-century Montreal. Class bias is apparent in several Montreal newspapers that gave more excessive coverage of murder cases in working-class rather than in bourgeois milieus. Overall, the analysis suggests that evidence from these sources does not necessarily correspond to reveal accurate historical information.

Les préjugés liés à la classe, au genre et à la religion ont conditionné les points de vue et l’information qui ont servi à décrire le meurtre survenu en 1895 d’une Montréalaise de 30 ans. La description du cas variait d’une source primaire à l’autre selon qu’on soit d’avis que la victime, Mélina Massé, avait été assassinée ou non par son époux prétendument violent. C’est en s’appuyant sur l’affaire ainsi que l’ont suivie divers journaux (y compris des sketches de scènes se déroulant en cour), les dépliants de deux comédies musicales et la réponse de l’avocat de la
défense que cette étude révèle les tribunes dont le public se servait pour s'exprimer dans le Montréal du tournant du siècle. Plusieurs journaux de Montréal entretenaient clairement un préjugé fondé sur la classe, couvrant davantage les affaires de meurtre dans la classe ouvrière que dans la bourgeoisie. Dans l'ensemble, l'analyse donne à penser que l'information discordante provenant de ces sources traduit mal la réalité historique.

CLASS, GENDER, and religious biases shaped the perspectives and evidence presented by different forms of primary sources portraying the court case involving the murder of a 30-year-old woman in Montreal in 1895. Descriptions of the case revolved around whether or not the victim, Mélina Massé, had been murdered by her allegedly abusive husband. This study draws from coverage in a variety of newspapers (including sketches of court scenes), two musical drama leaflets, and the defence lawyer’s response in the form of a pamphlet. Taken together, these divergent sources reveal more about class, gender, religion, and the venues for public voices in turn-of-the-century Montreal than they do about accurate historical information concerning the murder and court case. Several Montreal newspapers reveal apparent class bias in that they gave more excessive coverage to murder cases in working-class rather than in bourgeois milieux.

This study clarifies how these categories were used and configured both in the murder case and in the various printed portrayals of it. By placing the sources in context, principally in terms of their purpose and function, the study attempts to determine to what extent they differed from one another and precisely how they were shaped by the class, gender, and religion of their creators. More difficult to determine is to what extent the sources were read by audiences in the manner intended by their creators. What biases shaped these primary sources and their differing interpretations? What purpose did it serve for the newspapers to portray the alleged murderer, the husband, as a violent male prone to alcoholism and philandering? Why did the musical drama leaflets, on the other hand, sublimate the issue of domestic violence and celebrate the freedom of the husband? How did the defence lawyer justify the innocence of his client?

On June 13, 1895, at 2:35 p.m., Mélina Massé, a 30-year-old working-class housewife, was discovered slashed dead with a knife, with her baby boy by her side, in her home at 3426 rue Notre-Dame in the industrializing Montreal suburb of Saint-Henri.1 The criminal court case of Mélina Massé’s murder followed an initial investigation by Coroner McMahon

---

1 La Presse, June 14, 1895, p. 1; Montreal Daily Star, June 14, 1895, p. 1; The Gazette, June 14, 1895, p. 2; La Patrie, June 14, 1895, p. 3.
and a preliminary inquest at the Saint-Henri town hall that began on June 27, 1895. The local preliminary inquest resulted in the arrest of Napoléon Demers, her alleged abusive husband, who was charged for the murder of his wife on July 6. Witnesses at the inquest and at the criminal court cases testified to the husband’s alleged domestic violence, his excessive drinking, and his affair with Mademoiselle Rosalma Sauvé, a local music teacher. Méline’s baby boy died on August 31, 1895, at the home of his grandparents, during the course of her husband’s court proceedings.

In spite of these allegations, Demers pleaded not guilty to the crime before the magistrate on July 8 and on August 1. The case then moved to the Court of the Queen’s Bench in Montreal for a first trial lasting from September 9 to October 8. The jury disagreed (with a vote of eight for acquittal to four against), and Demers was then tried again. The prosecution’s persistence in the case indicates that Demers was thought to be guilty of the murder; yet for a second time he was acquitted on December 31, 1895, on grounds of insubstantial evidence.

Extensive coverage appeared in several Montreal newspapers such as La Presse, La Patrie, The Gazette, and The Montreal Daily Star, where sensational reporting included sketches of the deceased complete with demarcated knife wounds. This incited a letter to La Presse editors from Monseigneur Paul Bruchési, archbishop of the Diocese of Montreal, and criticism of local newspaper reports from Judge Wurtele of the Court of the Queen’s Bench in Montreal, with both authorities calling for more discretion. The murder trial was one of the longest in Canadian criminal history up to that time and attained national coverage in The Globe.

2 La Presse, June 15, 19, 24, and 26, 1895, p. 6; June 18, 20, and 22 1895, p. 1; July 2, 3, and 5, 1895, p. 6; Montreal Daily Star, June 24, 25, and 26, 1895, p. 8; The Gazette, June 15, 18, 19, and 26, 1895, p. 3; The Family Herald and Weekly Star, June 24, 1895, p. 12.

3 Family Herald and Weekly Star, September 9, 1895, p. 11.

4 La Presse, July 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 22, 1895, p. 6; August 1, 1895, p. 1; September 5, 1895, p. 6; Montreal Daily Star, June 26, 1895, p. 6; June 28, 1895, pp. 7–8; June 29, 1895, pp. 9 and 12; The Gazette, June 15, 18, 19, 26, and 29, 1895, p. 3; July 1 and 6, 1895, p. 6; July 9, 1895, p. 3; July 20, 1895, p. 2; July 3 and August 1, 1895, p. 3; Family Herald and Weekly Star, July 1, 1895, p. 6; July 8, 1895, p. 12; August 5, 1895, p. 10.

5 La Presse, September 9, 10, and 23, 1895, p. 6; The Gazette, September 6, 10, 14, 24, and 27, 1895, p. 2; September 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, and 30, 1895, p. 3; October 4, 1895, p. 3; October 8, 1895, p. 5; Family Herald and Weekly Star, September 16, 1895, p. 13; October 8, 1895, p. 14.

6 La Presse, October 15, 1895, p. 6; December 11, 13, and 31, 1895, p. 6; The Gazette, October 9, 1895, p. 2; December 28, 1895, p. 3.

7 La Presse, June 20, 1895, p. 1.


9 According to a report in La Presse, the trial lasted 53 days and cost the state $40,000 (La Presse, December 31, 1895, p. 6; The Gazette, October 9, 1895, p. 2).
and in *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*. La *Patrie* was still referring to the unsolved mystery of the Demers murder in 1910.

More than 100 local newspaper articles covered the six months of the inquest and court hearings. *La Presse* covered the proceedings most assiduously, with almost daily reports. On the day following the murder, this newspaper began with a front-page report of several columns, with subsequent one-column articles often appearing on page 6. *The Gazette* gave daily but shorter reports, often with one-column articles on pages 2 or 3. Of the local newspapers, *The Montreal Daily Star* and *La Patrie* gave the least coverage. The national newspaper *The Family Herald and Weekly Star* printed several columns at the opening and closing of the inquest and the trials. *The Globe* provided rare coverage.

The initial reactions of Archbishop Bruchesi and Judge Wurtele reflect how the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion were used and configured in other sources. Newspaper reports reveal that the murder incident initially provoked a gender-specific response and ethnic and religious prejudices as women feared for their safety in their own homes. This apprehension and neighbourhood defence of the streets was especially directed at Syrian street pedlars who made periodic visits to homes selling leaf tobacco, religious ornaments, trinkets, scissors, and knives. Both English and French newspapers reveal a general distrust of these pedlars, who inhabited an apartment block in central Montreal somewhat isolated from the majority francophone and anglophone communities. This newspaper commentary was indicative of a widespread phenomenon that persisted until the early twentieth century, resulting in federal government attempts to restrict Syrian and Jewish immigration in 1900.

The reports also reflect gendered social conventions, notably an awareness of the injustice of domestic violence and a cult of female domesticity. Although the media and the courts did not condone domestic violence, they reinforced motherhood and marriage as a woman’s primary role and the home and household management as a woman’s principal sphere of influence “rather than tackling the problem of violence head on.” Because

---

12 *The Gazette*, June 14 and 20, 1895, p. 2; *La Presse*, February 1, 1895, p. 6; June 15, 1895, p. 6; August 13, 1900, p. 1.
the principal concern was estimating the woman’s performance of her domestic responsibilities, her subordination to men, and her care of children, establishing the female virtue of the victim as housekeeper, wife, and mother was an initial priority. For instance, in the week following the murder, *The Gazette* reported that “Mrs. Demers was a good-looking woman of thirty years of age, and all who knew her say that she was most ladylike and quiet in her habits, and that she was industrious and a good housekeeper.” She was deemed “the best of wives . . . and all her neighbors gave her a reputation that any woman would be proud to bear.” As the trial progressed, the incidence of violence was presented as corollary evidence to the murder, without usage of the terms “wife-beating” or “domestic violence.”

A principal source of commentary about the murder and the trial, *The Gazette* in particular used the categories of class and gender in specific and subtle ways. Male publishers, editors, and journalists presented the murder of a housewife in a working-class neighbourhood as sensational news that elicited more interest and response on the part of women. However, the reports also reinforced female domesticity in a manner that appealed to the class and gendered sensibilities of both women and men in this period, such as respectable men who wanted to protect vulnerable women from violent situations.

The principal function of newspapers, to market and sell information to a literate class, was central to this class and gender bias. Subject to further inquiry are the differences in the newspapers, their journalists, and their readership. The coverage indicates that women continued to express a particular fascination with the trial as public interest in the case mounted, first among various classes and communities in Montreal, then throughout the country. Prior to telephone, radio, and television transmission, courtroom dramas were a source of free entertainment for many nineteenth-century Montrealers, with crowds flocking to the preliminary inquest at the Saint-Henri town hall and the literate purchasing newspapers on the subject. An estimated 300 spectators, mostly female, crowded the courtroom; many had brought their lunches and knitting and participated noisily, exhibiting gendered behaviour comparable to

16 *The Gazette*, June 14, 1895, p. 2; June 20, 1895, p. 5.
17 Ibid., June 15, p. 3.
that displayed in labour disputes and strikes at the time.\(^{19}\) In the absence of a rigorous examination of literacy rates and newspaper readership in Montreal during this period, it is difficult to determine whether the newspapers were gearing their interpretation to these women. In any event, this class and gendered perspective of the dominantly male management of the print media contradicted the decision of the male jurors in the first trial, as is shown in one newspaper sketch (see Figure 1).\(^{20}\)

Court records reveal that these male jurors found the husband not guilty, while all of the Montreal newspapers, in contrast, represented him as guilty. Exploring further sources generated by this dramatic event, especially the popular musical drama leaflets produced at the time as well as legal writing about the case, suggests how widely its significance and outcome were debated and how male elites sought to uphold the law and hence the justice of the husband’s acquittal. The role of newspapers in marketing sensational news to a specific audience is central to class and gender elements, but the central purpose — to sell newspapers — also skews the interpretation. In contrast, musical drama leaflets presented Catholic religious and social mores absolving the offender of guilt. Finally, legal commentary elaborated on the circumstantial evidence presented in the case that led to instilling a reasonable doubt in the minds of the jurors.

In all of these sources, bourgeois men controlled the dissemination of information, but every particular source nonetheless reveals a specific bias and different evidence. Popular musical drama leaflets offer an original perspective. One such leaflet, entitled \textit{La complainte de Demers}, was available at local shops for five cents and was dispensed by newspaper boys throughout the Montreal area (see Appendices A and C).\(^{21}\) Several such Montreal courtroom dramas, predating the soap opera, took the form of musical theatrical pieces from 1895 to 1905.\(^{22}\) As were newspapers, musical drama leaflets were directed at a literate class. Yet, like musical

---


\(^{21}\) \textit{La Presse}, October 10, 1895, p. 6; October 7, 1899, p. 14.

fanfares or local bands parading on Saint-Henri streets or playing in Sohmer Park, in other working-class districts in Montreal, and in Quebec regional towns, their popular content displayed distinct class differences with performances of the Opéra Français and Cercles Dramatiques catering to the haute bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie, and the local petite bourgeoisie of the time.23

The audience was most likely working-class, but there is no evidence to suggest that these pieces were actually performed in theatres or on the streets. The tunes and lyrics were composed orally and then recorded, suggesting that musical literacy, like literacy itself, was an even more powerful mechanism; the church-going population had a widespread familiarity with solfège or musical notation and with playing music by ear rather than reading it. To some extent, musical literacy was less limited among the working class than was reading literacy, which tended to be more characteristic of various levels of the bourgeoisie.24 Especially for the working class, the power of visual representations and musical dramas differed from that

Figure 1: Male jury at the murder trial of Napoléon Demers, 1895 (Source: Montreal Daily Star, September 10, 1895, p. 6).


of the printed word because images and music do not demand the comprehen-
sion of a written language. Images and music might seem to be more
accessible than printed documents, crossing boundaries of class, age,
gender, ethnicity, and religion more readily. Yet a critical analysis shows
there were limitations to these possibilities.

A close reading of the lyrics of the musical drama of the Demers murder
discloses distinct class, gender, and religious biases, certain Quebec male
bourgeois conventions, and Victorian Catholic values that contrast with
the popular and sensational newspaper coverage. These lyrics posed a
powerful, neutralizing counterpoint to the newspaper accusations of guilt,
an assertion of male respectability that negated violence. The anonymous
author of *La complainte de Demers* did not mention, for instance, the
brutal realities of the loss of a child, domestic violence, and the husband’s
drinking problem. Yet, like the newspapers, the first verse gives an
account of the peaceful life of the couple conforming to a domestic ideology
with fixed male and female roles. The woman is presented as the keeper of
the hearth who went about her housework each morning, the man as setting
out for work to earn the daily bread. The second verse reveals how the ten-
derness of the couple reproduced two children, a boy and a girl, to comple-
ment their happiness. The third and fourth verses are more religious in
tone and set the scene for a strange and tragic fate. They remind us that,
because joy is ephemeral and no pleasure is complete, God intends a a sacri-
fice for this young couple, but he also pardons the guilty.

The fifth verse shifts to the dramatic narrative as the husband returns
from work to find his dead wife. The next verse discloses the gory
details of the crime scene, with the victim’s cut throat and the assassin
leaving no clue. The seventh verse shows the involvement of the townspen-
people, the nature of the gossip and spectacle, and the human cause of the
crime. The following verse observes that neighbours did not see the wife
depart on her errands and quickly ran over to find the dead woman
with her child by her side. It describes the instant reactions: neighbours
wept and shouted; the doctor, priest, and police were called.

The subsequent verses tell of the consternation of the husband as he
arrives on the scene, the ensuing inquiry, and his arrest. Verses 12 and 13
demonstrate how popular opinion turned against the husband, but absolve
him of guilt with the claim that justice has been served. The investigation
is said to have made a fatal error by not unveiling several details.

The theme of absolution ensues with movement to the court case in
verses 14 to 19, which point to the talent of the defending attorney and
to the lack of certainty as to the husband’s guilt. The piece reveals more
of the unfolding details — a person testifies to having seen the wife
leave in the morning, and a possible time of death emerges that is not
consistent with the medical report. Verses 17 and 18 build up to a
verdict, with the jury leaving the room for the impending judgement.
Yet insufficient proof produces no verdict, and the cheerless father is
found neither innocent nor guilty. He faces an unhappy life, but the law has had its say, and there is no resolution in the case.

The first musical drama leaflet, unlike the newspapers, absolved the husband of guilt and viewed him as a victim of a strange and twisted fate in God’s design. *Le Dénuement des affaires Demers, Shortis et Gauthier* is a sequel musical drama also with no author (Appendices B and D). The first two verses on the Demers murder trial appear before those of Shortis and Gauthier, which were also covered in the newspapers. As had the first musical drama leaflet, it absolved Demers of guilt, but went further by celebrating his freedom after a three-month incarceration. It was also religious in tone and was set to the air of “Il est né, le divin enfant,” a traditional eighteenth-century Christmas carol. The Demers verses ended with the claim that Napoléon was not a saint, but then who is perfect? The lawyer had done a good job, Demers spent a merry Christmas, and all was well with the world.25

In terms of genre, music is a powerful carrier and transmitter of culture. These leaflets, sold on the streets, had several socio-political implications. Their lyrics and tunes were popular folk mechanisms, as were the songs of labour subsconsciously familiar to many unionized workers. With a dominant focus on the stories of the working class rather than those of the bourgeoisie, these late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Montreal musical editions in some respects resembled threepenny operas and opéras de quat’sous later performed in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States. However, the Victorian Montreal versions differed from these later precursors to the modern musical comedy because they were restricted to newsprint leaflets, never performed, and distributed on a much smaller and local scale.26

*The Threepenny Opera* of Bertolt Brecht and similar works by other musical playwrights were also faux-folk and intellectual contributions, bourgeois interpretations of working-class life. More apt comparisons are the tradition of the complainte or tragedy that originated in France and the broadside ballads and song sheets proliferating among the American working class. Both North American musical traditions emanated from the European and British mediaeval period.

These musical drama leaflets may have originated from mediaeval broadsheets and tragic laments, but they were also adapted to the specific class, gendered, religious, and ethnic context of late-nineteenth-century Quebec. They displayed the religious mores of the Catholic Church and the elite control of printing and publishing that sublimated class

---

25 *La complainte de Demers; Le dénouement des affaires Demers, Shortis et Gauthier.*
26 Quebec theatre was in a nascent stage in this period with the apparent production of only 40 out of 116 published plays from 1868 to 1900. Anne Nothof, *History of Canadian Theatre*, retrieved May 26, 2008 from http://www.canadian_theatre.com.
differences and reinforced patriarchy and female subordination. The dominant characteristic of the Montreal musical dramas was their reinforcement of class-based capitalism, Roman Catholic virtues, and Victorian male bourgeois values through a moral and religious treatment of scandalous events. In this and other respects, they differed from popular folk tunes, penny operas, and opéras de quat’sous, which were social satires that challenged capitalism and ridiculed morals.  

Running contrary to the dramatic conciliatory resolution presented in the musical dramas was the public question of the not-guilty deliberation and acquittal. In response to this, Demers’s lawyer M. O. Desmarais joined the public debate by publishing a pamphlet, entitled Plaidoyer de M. O. Desmarais : l’Affaire de Napoléon Demers, which comprised a legal defence of his client’s innocence. This pamphlet was most likely read by other lawyers and by a literate general public. There appears to have been no reference to it in the newspapers. It includes a preface by Henri Roullaud, an introduction by Desmarais, his closing statement, and selected court testimony. His argument is based on British criminal jurisprudence, not on soap opera drama or religion and social mores, and is thus less reflective of the class, gender, and religious biases of the newspapers and musical drama sources. In the preface, Roullaud detailed the sequence of the investigation and the possibility of Méлина’s suicide or her murder by a vagabond or thief leaving no trace. He concluded that the investigation was in vain and that the murder remained a mystery. Suspicion of the husband had not been based on trustworthy legal testimony, and the charges of domestic violence had been exaggerated.

Desmarais opened with the point that Demers was judged not guilty, but not innocent; he was therefore acquitted. As is not always the case, the lawyer was convinced of his client’s innocence. Since he felt that public opinion had not been based on fact, he had decided to publish the stenographer’s notes. In his closing statement, Desmarais pled with the jury to ponder seriously the gravity of the situation. He mentioned that only

French-Canadian men made up the jury and that a verdict should be shaped by justice (Figure 1). He emphasized Demers’s good character and his lack of motive. Desmarais’s central argument was that, in a criminal case, guilt must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt, and the circumstantial evidence presented in this case raised several reasonable doubts. He pointed to the possible fabrication of Coroner McMahon’s evidence and to the questionable testimony of several witnesses. These included Trudeau, the neighbour who would not sign a deposition testifying to having seen Mélina leave the house, and the washerwoman Madame Nantel, who alleged having witnessed Napoléon’s domestic violence, excessive drinking, and philandering.

Maintaining that Demers was a respectable citizen from a good family, his lawyer argued that Demers was not an alcoholic who had an alleged extramarital affair with Mademoiselle Sauvé. His reasoned conclusion was that he did not know how the crime had been committed, and that this was corroborated by some of the court testimony. At one point during the trial, the prosecution raised the possibility of an unknown killer. Monsieur Ouimet, a penitentiary inmate, testified to having heard of death threats against Mélina from an alleged assassin whose name he promised to reveal in exchange for his own freedom. 28

The legal defence presented by Desmarais is plausible. What is more apparent is the gender bias of the courts and their male supporters, reinforced by both the print and visual media, as well as by the musical dramas. More difficult to determine is to what extent the male bias crossed class lines. Useful in this respect is the examination of another Montreal murder case that took place in the same year and also resulted from a marital dispute, that of bourgeois César Demers (ironically with the same family name as Napoléon). In *Erreur judiciaire : l’Affaire Demers ou la valeur des preuves morales*, Jean Badreux, a reporter at *Le Monde*, gave his account of this second Demers trial. Since the body was not found in this case and the wife’s departure was voluntary, there is little room for comparison with the facts of the previous Demers case.

In this pamphlet, however, the reporter revealed that, similar to the Napoléon Demers case, César’s alleged murder of his wife Léonore Beauchamp on October 3, 1895 attracted the attention of several journalists and crowds of women. Léonore’s departure from Montreal on that date and her sudden reappearance in the courtroom during the ensuing trial led to a reversal of the jury’s guilty deliberation. Badreux applauded César’s acquittal and the zeal and intelligence of the police constable and coroner Frissonnette. In this source, Badreux reinforced his belief in the justice system and in marriage, a perspective in some respects similar to

---

the class and gender bias and to the moral and religious tone of the musical version of the Napoléon’s trial.

Another relevant factor is the class bias the media displayed through excessive coverage of murder trials of the working class compared to those of the bourgeoisie. For example, in the fall of 1895, *La Presse*, *La Patrie, The Montreal Daily Star*, and, to a lesser extent, *Le Monde* published detailed, consistent, and even occasional front-page reports, complete with sketches of the Napoléon Demers and the Shortis murder trials (the latter taking place in Valleyfield at that time), but made no mention of the César Demers case. Prior to more extensive reports in Montreal newspapers, initial print media coverage of César’s case was apparently confined to *Le Monde* readers, a point observed by police constable Frissonnette. One could discern that the local newspapers *La Presse* and *The Gazette* were perhaps gearing their selection to a working-class readership, but the more bourgeois market of *La Patrie* and *Le Monde* was also driven by the greater privacy and mysterious circumstances surrounding this case.29

Let us elaborate on the differing class situations in these two Demers cases: César was a lawyer (without Quebec Bar qualifications) living in a charming little cottage on rue Sherbrooke; Napoléon was a carter living in Saint-Henri on the first floor of a modest two-storey brick building on rue Notre-Dame. In a far cry from Mélina’s lonely evenings when Napoléon sojourned to Sohmer Park for entertainment, Léonore had been slated to drive by coach to a sumptuous dinner with her husband and friends and a grand gala at l’Opéra Français prior to her expressed despondence with her marriage and disappearance. Napoléon’s income as a skilled tradesman gave Mélina access to a washerwoman, but Léonore’s substantial legacy allowed her to hire at least two domestic servants, one of whom was her *femme de chambre* or personal servant Malvina, who had been permitted to attend a “negro” performance at the Royal Theatre on the evening of Léonore’s departure.30

The contrasting finances of the two Demers couples are compounded by the subtle difficulties of this particular marriage. Badreux does not mention or elaborate on the contents of the Demers marriage contract or on Léonore’s will, but implies that, without money or position, César was taking advantage of Léonore’s inheritance from her uncle. Her mother, Madame Veuve Beauchamp, a substantial Montreal property-owner, had not blessed the marriage and had severed all relations with her daughter. Badreux describes a Léonore who adored her husband, but was isolated from her family, envious of his public role, and jealous

of his friends. To some extent, Badreux places the burden of marriage breakdown on the wife and alludes to her acrimonious behaviour towards her husband. César was nonetheless suspected from the start of killing his wife and disposing of her body to gain her inheritance; an unsolved case would allow him sole access to that fortune.\textsuperscript{31}

Though the circumstances differ from a legal standpoint, the cases clarify some class differences. By juxtaposing the public/private divide of a bourgeois milieu with the intimate proximity of home and street in a working-class neighbourhood, this second case provides another class and gendered perspective of social space. In a more secluded neighbourhood on rue Sherbrooke, the domestic servants had noted Léonore’s absence on the evening in question. Not until days later did Frissonnette appear at César’s door in response to the plea of his mother-in-law and the crowds gathering on the street outside the home. The policeman was exercising social authority by expressing concern for the respectable majority anglophone residents of rue Sherbrooke who did not want hordes of unemployed vagrants on their polite street. Demers replied that his wife’s disappearance was not a police but a court matter. Badreux showed his own class bias by pointing out that Frissonnette was more accustomed to dealing with people of humbler status and was therefore intimidated by Demers’s class position. Interestingly enough, the case only entered the courts following the intervention of higher authorities, and the unfolding of events contrasted with the immediate community response and quick arrival of civic and religious authorities following Méline’s demise. Again, the differing situations are crucial.

The financial means of the two couples may have differed and influenced newspaper coverage, but common to both cases is a gender bias and a patriarchal legal system confined to male judges, lawyers, juries, and reporters (Figure 1). With only second-hand references to Méline’s and Léonore’s unhappiness, viewed from a male perspective, the absence of a female voice is problematic and hinders any meaningful and accurate analysis. Taken together with Kathryn Harvey’s work on Montreal domestic violence cases from 1869 to 1879, the Méline Massé and Léonore Beauchamp murder cases could form part of a broader study examining marital breakdown in various class contexts within the same time frame and in different locales.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Baudreux, \textit{Erreur judiciaire}, pp. 3–5.
One could trace the escalation of familial tension to the physical reality of the home and neighbourhood, challenging the dominant class- and gender-based discourse that attributed domestic violence to the “animality” of male working-class culture stemming from alcohol consumption, gambling, and strained finances.33 In view of the proximity of dwellings, the thinness of walls, the amount of traffic on the street, and neighbourhood ties, the newspaper reports (based on court testimony) lead one to believe that Mélina’s murder appears to have been premeditated and carefully orchestrated. The downstairs neighbours, Charles and Mélodie Déguise, testified to having heard no unusual sounds throughout the day. Their only departure from their shop and home prior to the murder was for five o’clock morning mass at Église Saint-Henri celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi or Fête-Dieu.34

Mélina’s and Napoléon’s material and personal circumstances are conducive to a more concrete analysis. Significant residential mobility in late-nineteenth-century Montreal may have contributed to a breakdown in social support networks and the absence of community intervention in the prevention of the crime. In her investigation of more than 250 cases of violent domestic crimes tried in the Seine assize court in turn-of-the-century Paris, Eliza Ferguson has revealed that, in close-knit urban communities, crimes of passion between domestic partners demonstrate social control at the household and neighbourhood level. Neighbours who had intimate knowledge of one another’s daily lives often readily intervened in domestic disputes.35

In Mélina’s case, this intervention occurred after the crime, not before, and could be explained by the family’s several recent moves. The Demers family had lived in the rue Notre-Dame dwelling for only a month and a half; before this move, they had lived in Saint-Henri, at the corner of Richelieu and Atwater, and in Hochelaga. In the course of court proceedings, family members and a former boarder testified to having witnessed Napoléon’s abuse of his wife and child, yet Mélina’s appeals for help were directed to her family in Saint-Charles, not to neighbours in Saint-Henri or Montreal. Her entrusting of the care of her eldest child Maria to her parents prior to the murder may have resulted from the occurrence of escalating abuse characteristic of the cycle of domestic violence.36

33 Hughes, “Representations and Counter-Representations of Domestic Violence.”
34 The Gazette, June 20, 1895, p. 5; Montreal Daily Star, June 14, 1895, p. 7; Family Herald and Weekly Star, June 17, 1895, p. 10; The Gazette, June 14, 1895, p. 2; La Patrie, June 14, 1895, p. 3; Suzanne Morton, At Odds: Gambling and Canadians, 1919–1969 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 49–50, 70–88 and chap. 4.
36 Jason A. Gilliland, “Modeling Residential Mobility in Montreal, 1860–1900,” Historical Methods, vol. 31, no. 1 (Winter 1998), pp. 27–42; La Presse, July 19, 1895, p. 6; The Gazette, June 14, 1895,
According to the principal source of newspapers, the murder first elicited a gender-specific response on the part of women who feared for safety in their own homes. The ensuing trial coverage drew from this reaction to emphasize heightened female interest in the court proceedings. Trial reports presented a domestic maternal ideology and a fixed assignment of male and female roles, notably a masculine respectability and a womanly virtue that negated the violence. Contrary to the court deliberations, the conclusion inferred by newspaper reports was that the husband was guilty. The central purpose, particularly of the local papers, was to present and sell sensational news of the murder and the court case to both male and female readers. The class and gender biases of the male publishers, editors, and journalists shaped the reports and the interpretation. A comparison of the newspapers’ treatment of this Demers case in a working-class family with another murder case involving a Montreal bourgeois couple in the same year reinforces how class biases shaped the reports and the extent to which differing financial circumstances influenced gender relations in this period.

In the musical drama leaflets, religious overtones shaped the class and gender bias. The romantic union of the couple and their reproduction of two children are presented as an idyllic situation conforming to the Catholic practices of the time. In this source, the religious beliefs of the anonymous creators sublimated the violence. The religious interpretation was that the husband was not guilty. Designed to entertain with no evidence of performance, this public venue reinforced Catholic ideals and celebrated the freedom of the husband.

Unlike the previous two sources, the defence lawyer's response to the court proceedings took an objective approach by downplaying the violence and the class and gender conflict. The lawyer pointed to the circumstantial evidence as inconclusive. The reasoned conclusion was that the husband was not guilty. Legal in purpose, this pamphlet may have been largely confined to a professional and small public readership.

Limited information on the authors and audiences of these divergent primary sources necessitates a contextualizing and comparative approach that points to common class and gender biases in a variety of newspapers and to a dominant religious approach in the two musical drama leaflets. The legal argumentation driving the defence lawyer's response strove to override the class, gender, and religious biases evident in the other sources. In all three, however, the specific perspectives of their creators shaped conflicting interpretations of the murder and court case.
APPENDIX A

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal (BANQM), Documents manuscrits, enveloppe 4059.

2ème COUPLÉT
Aux lois de la nature
Tous deux s’étaient soumis
Et leur tendresse pure
Avait porté ses fruits.
Mous toute leur famille
Se composait de deux :
(bis)
Un garçon, une fille;
Puis on vivait heureux.

3ème COUPLET
La joie est éphémère,
Tout plaisir incomplet.
Il n’est, sur cette terre,
Aucun bonheur parfait.
Le Dieu de la Justice,
Dieu bon, mais Dieu jaloux,
(bis)
Volait un sacrifice
Des deux jeunes époux.

4ème COUPLET
Il pardonne aux coupables,
Sans se lasser jamais;
Mais bien impénétrables
Sont toujours ses secrets.
Tel vit dans la jouissance,
Qui demain pleurera;
(bis)
Tel autre a l’espérance
Que son sort changera.

5ème COUPLET
Selon son habitude,
L’homme un matin partit.
A sa besogne rude
Tout droit il se rendit.
Soudain, dans la journée
— Grand Dieu, quel triste sort !—
(bis)
L’époux, à sa rentrée,
Chez lui trouve la mort.

6ème COUPLET
La mort, œuvre d’un crime
Accompli sans pitié,
Et la pauvre victime,
C’est sa tendre moitié.
Il la voit là bien morte,
Le cou tout transpercé.
(bis)
L'assassin à la porte
Point de clé n’a laissé.

7me COUPLET
Ce fut, dans le village,
Bien grande sensation
Et plus d’un commérage
Se fit dans la maison.
C’était triste spectacle,
Pour chaque visiteur;
(bis)
Mais ce n’est point miracle :
Le crime a son auteur.

8me COUPLET
Des gens du voisinage,
Ne voyant point sortir
La femme de ménage,
Aussitôt d’accourir.
Mais, là, chacun s’écrie :
O spectacle effrayant !
(bis)
La femme gît sans vie,
Auprès de son enfant.

9me COUPLET
On court, on crie, on pleure;
On mandate un médecin.
Le curé vient sur l’heure,
Aussi chaque voisin.
Et bientôt la police
Se hâte d’accourir,
(bis)
Et tous gens de justice,
Pour de tout s’enquérir.

10me COUPLET
L’époux lui-même arrive,
Le visage en sueur.
Sa surprise est fort vive,
Bien grande est sa pâleur.
Il pleure, il se désole,
Il est bien malheureux;
(bis)
Mais vite on le console,
Chacun à qui mieux mieux.

11me COUPLET
L’enquête se commence,
Nombreux sont les témoins.
On fait la surveillance
Dans les coins et recoins.
Mais tout reste mystère,
Pourtant, il faut trouver.
(bis)
On arrête le père
Et le fait accuser.

12me COUPLET
Et l’opinion publique
Contre lui va tourner.
On croit que tout s’explique,
Il faut le condamner.
Est-il, en ce bas monde,
Plus cruelles douleurs ?
(bis)
La justice est féconde
En fatales erreurs.

13me COUPLET
Par malheur pour le père,
Les faits sont contre lui :
Sa vie était légère,
Il rentrait tard la nuit.
Comme dans toute histoire
Qui vient devant la loi,
(bis)
Plus d’un a bien mémoire
Qu’il manquait à sa foi.

14me COUPLET
Enfin le jour arrive
Qu’il doit paraître en cour.
Dans l’anxiété vive
On attendait ce jour.
Quel verdict va-t-on rendre,
Au solennel moment ?
(bis)
Il a, pour le défendre,  
Un cœur chaud, éloquent.

15me COUPLÉT  
De nouveau l'on raconte  
Les détails du forfait.  
Mais rien, en fin de compte,  
De certain n'apparaît.  
Si l'époux est coupable  
— Rien de sûr n'en fait foi—  
(bis)  
Etonnant, efforoyable,  
Toujours est son sang-froid.

16me COUPLÉT  
Quelqu'un de sa demeure  
La femme a vu sortir,  
Ce qui changerait l'heure  
Du grand crime à punir.  
L'opinion prédomine  
Qu'il eut lieu le matin;  
(bis)  
Les gens de médecine  
Diffèrent sur ce point.

17me COUPLÉT  
Après tout témoignage,  
L'éloquent défenseur,  
Par son ardent langage,  
Fait couler plus d'un pleur.  
Il remet en mémoire  
Les détails du procès.  
(bis)  
Il acquiert de la gloire,  
Le crime en fait les frais.

18me COUPLÉT  
Puis, après la Couronne,  
Du juge c'est le tour.  
L'heure suprême sonne :  
Le jury sort de cour.  
Moment, heure sublime !  
Qui décide du sort.  
(bis)
L'accusé se ranime ;
Point de verdict encor.

19me COUPLET
Innocent ou coupable
— On n'a pu rien prouver—
Sa vie est misérable,
Nul ne peut le nier.
C'est un malheureux père,
Mais aucun n'a le droit
(bis)
De lui jeter la pierre :
Ainsi le veut la loi.

APPENDIX B
PREMIERE PARTIE

DEMERS

(Air : Il est né, le divin enfant.)

Il est libre, Demers, enfin ;
Pour le dire, aidez-moi, musettes,
Il est libre, Demers, enfin,
Et tout est bien qui finit bien.

Pour dire que c'est un malin,
Ils étaient des mille prophètes.
Pour dire que c'est un malin,
Ils s'étaient tous donné la main.
          Il est libre, etc.

Source: BANQM, Documents manuscrits, enveloppe 4059.

APPENDIX C

La Complainte de Demers
(A rhyming tale of the Saint-Henri tragedy)

1st verse
Close by a major city,
Beneath a humble roof,
A couple's life was peaceful,
Much more than queen and king.
The woman to her housework
Did set about each morn;
(repeat)
The man went to his labour
To earn their daily bread.
2nd verse
Unto the laws of nature
Did both of them submit,
And from their pure affection
Was born to them a child.
But their entire family
Consisted of but two:
(repeat)
One boy, one girl together,
In happiness they lived.

3rd verse
But joy is transitory,
All pleasure incomplete.
There is, within our lifetimes,
No perfect happiness.
The Lord, the God of Justice,
A good but jealous God,
(repeat)
Required from the couple
A dreadful sacrifice.

4th verse
The Lord forgives the guilty,
And never does he tire,
But thoroughly mysterious
His secrets always are.
Who lives today in gladness,
Tomorrow he will cry;
(repeat)
Another one is hopeful
One day his fate will change.

5th verse
In keeping with his habit,
The man one morning left,
And to his cruel labour
He set off straight away.
That day, all of a sudden,
—Great Lord, unhappy fate!—
(repeat)
The husband, on returning,
Found death was in his home.
6th verse
The death: a crime committed.
No pity had been shown.
Who was the wretched victim?
None but his better half.
He saw her there unmoving,
Her throat had been impaled.
(repeat)
The killer by the doorway
Had left no clue at all.

7th verse
There was, throughout the village,
An uproar everywhere,
And many were the rumours
That spread around the house.
It was a moving image
For every visitor,
(repeat)
But ’twas not supernatural:
The crime had human cause.

8th verse
Some people from the quarter,
Who did not see depart
The housewife on her errands,
Ran over right away.
They cried, upon arriving:
“O what a fearful scene!”
(repeat)
The woman lay all lifeless;
Her child was at her side.

9th verse
They ran, they wept, they shouted.
A doctor soon was called.
The curate hurried over,
And every neighbour, too.
And shortly the policeman
Did hasten to arrive,
(repeat)
And every man of justice,
To scrutinize the scene.
10th verse
And then arrived the husband,
His brow was drenched in sweat.
Extreme was his amazement,
His pallor very great.
He cried, his heart was broken;
He could not be consoled,
(repeat)
But people offered comfort,
Each one more than the last.

11th verse
An inquiry was opened,
With many witnesses.
In every nook and cranny
Did they investigate.
It all remained a mystery,
But someone must be found:
(repeat)
The father was arrested
And with the crime was charged.

12th verse
An popular opinion
Did then against him turn.
The case looked quite sufficient:
He had to be condemned.
Could e’er this world have offered
A crueller form of grief?
(repeat)
For justice is imperfect,
With fatal errors rife.

13th verse
Alas! To be the father,
The facts not on his side.
His life inconsequential;
He came home late at night.
And as in every story
That comes before the law,
(repeat)
Several were the details
That never came to light.
14th verse
At last arrived the morning
He was to come to court.
The day had been awaited
With great anxiety.
What verdict would they issue
When came the solemn time?
(repeat)
He had, as his defender,
Warm heart and silver tongue.

15th verse
And once again were detailed
The facts of the affair.
But ultimately nothing
Appeared to be assured.
For were the husband guilty
— it was no certain thing—
(repeat)
Astonishing and fearful
Cold-blooded had he been.

16th verse
A person, from his window,
Had seen the woman leave:
The timing of the foul deed
Was not as it appeared.
Belief was held most widely
It took place in the morn;
(repeat)
The doctors' thoughts, however,
With this did not agree.

17th verse
The testimonies over,
The eloquent defence,
By using fiery language,
Did many tears provoke.
He made the crowd remember
The details of the trial.
(repeat)
He had his hour of glory;
The crime would pay the price.
18th verse
Then, once the Crown had spoken,
It was the judge's turn.
The final hour sounded:
The jury left the room.
The crucial time of judgment!
His fate was in their hands.
(repeat)
Arose then the accused:
No verdict had been reached.

19th verse
If innocent or guilty
— Not proven either way —
His life was quite unhappy;
This could not be denied.
He was a cheerless father,
But none could be the first
(repeat)
To cast a stone upon him:
The law had had its say.

APPENDIX D
Le Dénouement des affaires Demers, Shortis et Gauthier
Part one: Demers
(Tune: Il est né, le divin enfant)

He is free, Demers, at last;
Help me to tell my tale, O Muses.
He is free, Demers, at last,
And all is well that ends up well.

Saying he's nothing but a villain,
Prophets there were, a thousand strong,
Saying he's nothing but a villain,
They came together and all joined hands.
He is free, etc.