

Introduction

PICTURE A condemned murderer being sentenced to death, or eating a last meal, or trudging ever-so-reluctantly into the execution chamber. In your mind's eye, do you see this wretched creature as a woman? Most of us would not, given that over 99 percent of the persons executed in the United States are men.¹ Female offenders, both girls and women, are so seldom found on death row that, once condemned, they may be ignored and forgotten.²

Of course, occasional media coverage of high-profile executions temporarily raises awareness of the death penalty for women. A modern case with front-page national coverage was that of Karla Faye Tucker, executed in Texas on February 3, 1998.³ Tucker caught the attention of the popular media in part because of the grisly nature of her crime (murder by pickax) and in part because she was a pretty, photogenic white woman. An example of an earlier but similarly famous case was that of Ruth Brown Snyder, executed in New York on January 12, 1928.⁴ Snyder's execution in New York's electric chair was surreptitiously photographed by a journalist, and that shocking photograph appeared the next morning on the front page of the *New York Daily News*, destined to be reprinted many times.⁵ Journalistic descriptions of collected cases also abound, often tending to exploit them with lurid details.⁶

There have been riveting films based on this theme. Some are built around real women's cases. The Florida case of Aileen Wuornos, executed on October 9, 2002, spawned several films. The best-known was a semi-fictionalized account entitled *Monster*,⁷ released in 2003 and starring Charlize Theron, who received both a Golden Globe and an Oscar. The Wuornos case earlier had been the basis for documentary films based upon her real-life behavior.⁸ Nearly half a century ago, the 1958 film *I Want to Live*⁹ provided a reasonably accurate portrayal of the case of Barbara Graham, executed in California on June 6, 1955. As with Theron's recognition for her portrayal of Wuornos, actress Susan Hayward also won both a Golden Globe and an Oscar for her portrayal of Graham.¹⁰ Other films have portrayed fictionalized women under sentences of death. *Last Dance*, released in 1996, starred Sharon Stone as a woman sentenced to death and actually executed. Based on a composite of several cases, both real and fictional, Stone portrayed a condemned woman who evolves from being a tough, foul-mouthed killer to a nurturing big sister and would-be lover before being executed.¹¹

But what of the rest of the women sentenced to death and, in some cases, actually executed? Who were they, and why were these extremely rare women singled out to receive this ultimate punishment? Why are such women so commonly condemned but ignored by the death penalty system, by scholarly research on crime and the death penalty, and to some degree by the popular media? These questions have been asked by authors who have gone before, as when Kathleen O'Shea remarks, "Few though their numbers may be, they are on death row, and for the most part terribly isolated, invisible, and alone." A recent investigative report labels them the "forgotten population." Apparently, there is a similar tendency to ignore such cases in Britain, as well, where "their cases remain almost totally unknown."¹²

Previous studies of the national landscape around the death penalty for women have identified and analyzed systemic themes and issues.¹³ However, by their very nature, these studies have not attempted to dig deeply into the experience of any one jurisdiction.¹⁴ The present study, then, is one entry into exploration of this next level of analysis. Ohio is in many ways a typical, middle-of-the-road death penalty state. It is my hope that reflection on Ohio's experience with the death penalty for women may say something valuable about the death penalty in general, in Ohio and beyond.