

Wray v. Wray: Public Perceptions of Women's Health in the Antebellum Courtroom

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This research covered the divorce case of Wray v. Wray in 1851 and the appeals of Mr. Albert G. Wray and Mrs. Susan M. Wray to the Supreme Court (Wray v. Wray, Montgomery County Chancery Court Record Book, 1851). There were many different facets of this court case. However, this research focuses on the effect of public viewpoints of women's mental health and hysteria in the eyes of the law. Due to the misunderstandings of mental health, the research hoped to prove that Susan M. Wray was able to use the diseases to her advantage, since her case of adultery was condemning due to witness testimonials and evidence letters.

The research started by reviewing and transcribing the court proceedings and appeals to identify mentions of mental derangement, hysteria, insanity, partial insanity, monomania, and melancholia and to determine the characteristics of each disease and how those diseases were being described in the court proceedings. Witness testimonials and evidence letters were also examined for any mention that Mrs. Wray had any of these diseases. The research also involved looking at other newspapers, court proceedings, and medical journals from this time period to get a basic understanding of these diseases. Most of the source material came from the court proceedings and appeals themselves. Differences in the idea of insanity and what made someone insane, partially insane, or hysterical widely changed throughout the case.

The lack of a publicly or medically accepted definition or distinction among hysteria, mental derangement, partial insanity, or insanity uncovered the underlying idea that insanity and mental health were still very much unprecedented topics. Mrs. Wray's legal team used this lack of understanding to her advantage to argue for her mental state and soundness of mind. Her attorneys' exploitation of her mental state in the case ultimately resulted in her legal win. The argument that she had lapses in time where she could not remember or comprehend what was going on in the world around her ultimately exonerated her on the moral and legal

consequences of adultery. Because she was able to use a misunderstood disease to her advantage, this case exhibits the pitfalls and challenges the courtroom faced at the time in resolving disputes and finding justice. This case widens our perspective and knowledge on women's past experiences with legal and medical systems in Alabama, as well as our understanding of our modern legal and medical systems.

Statement of Research Advisor

Ms. Sullivan's research argues that debates around the use of an insanity plea helped change public perceptions of women's proper role in the home, the courtroom, and the asylum. Her project recognizes how ordinary Alabamians, like Susan Wray, interacted with the male-dominated legal and medical systems of the state to create lasting changes to these realms.

-Kelly Kennington, History