

The Tell-Tale Blade

- thoughts on the knives used on Martha Tabram and what they imply

by Cazard

There are 2 questions about the murder of Martha Tabram that I'd deem of interest above all others, for once the question of how the twine encountered each other, and then the infinitely more intriguing and, if you forgive the pun, double-edged matter of the knives, particularly one of them.

I'd like to get over the first one more quickly.

How we decide on how Tabram met her murderer largely depends on the issue of premeditation, which touches on the knife-matter, as we shall see. Perhaps the earliest public voice opting for the murder not having been a premeditated one had been Francis Hewitt's via the Morning Advertiser shortly after¹, opining that the victim had been accompanied, that a quarrel had broken out and that Tabram's company stabbed her 39 times in the stead of a civilised argument (the inference being mine).

An alternative version is that the murderer chanced upon her. We envision a man making his way through all the left open buildings in search for a defenceless since sleeping homeless or drunk woman, who's some way off her usual doss-place and decided to rather sleep it off on a landing, and the man is in luck, for he finds Tabram. Yes, it's possible.

The more likely scenario is a combination of the two, which has Tabram indeed arriving in company, but this company already having murder on its mind: he brought not one, but two knives, one large enough to later allow the idea it could have been a bayonet; this alone implies premeditation, unless he was someone who just happened to be in the habit of carrying this mini-arsenal about him. We do what we do.

The only other plausible alternative I can see has the murderer following Tabram. The problem with this version is that, again, he'd have been more lucky than he'd hoped he could be with his quarry ending her walk sleeping on a landing. He also could have followed her only to have her closing her door between him and her, unless he knew her and where she was living.²

Thus the most convincing sequence of events is Tabram and her killer arriving at the scene together.³ And, with the exception of the night-crawler in luck, all these scenarios also strongly imply that the victim had already been dead by the time Alfred Crow came home in whatever state at 3.30 am. That he didn't see her in a pool of blood like John Reeves later might be simply his own fault – not very attentive, since he thought her to be a sleeping homeless, and we don't have exact measurements of that bloody pool. To an arachnophobic the spider I see is at least thrice as big, and for all we know Reeves could have seen the blood only upon greater scrutinizing. It was dark, after all. Blood would appear basically black on a floor the colour of which we don't know. We recall

that Dr. Killeen stated at the inquest, that she'd been 'dead some three hours'.⁴ And although the means for establishing the time of death were far from being precise, we shouldn't disregard this.

This off the table, how can we infer that the murder was premeditated – in fact *very* much so – from the knives alone? Why are these blades so important, why the larger one especially so?

Those two blades, together with the apparent absence of a slit throat and at least an attempt of disembowelment, could be named as the chief reasons why Tabram is by many considered not to be a victim of the same man who'd later kill Polly Nichols, Annie Chapman and, in my opinion, Catherine Eddowes and Mary Kelly, and possibly Alice McKenzie and Frances Coles. And the rest of us are simply undecided, but fewer have actually attempted to give a sufficient explanation for the presence of the larger of these two weapons on the George Yard Buildings-landing that night.

The question is two questions, because the puzzlement begins with that large blade, and what we wonder about more often than why the large one had been brought in the first place is which of the two had been used first. Had the wound to the heart been the final blow after a 38 stabs-long frenzy, or had it been delivered first?

I subject that the very presence of this larger blade strongly suggests the answer to this question, and implies even more.

Surprisingly often the scenario of the stab to the heart being the concluding one appears to be dominating in discussions, and be it at least by implication. The murderer stabbing Tabram 38 times with a comparably small knife and then, since she refuses to die, finishing her off with a strike to the heart, executed with a bigger weapon he'd conveniently had at hand as well. A variation of this would have him stab her this often with the smaller knife to make her suffer, effectively to torture her, before making sure she won't survive with the big one.

It is possible that the idea being such a present and recurring one might be due to it being essentially a bad meme. The very term 'final blow' is a very suggestive and powerful one, the image being easily conveyed, and if it was the other way round we'd still be left with wondering about the purpose of the, now subsequent, 38 other stabs.

If one favours this solution one not only neglects the fact that she didn't appear to have screamed. An all too real possibility when someone is stabbed this often all over the body. Even if Tom Wescott is right, and the Hewitts did in fact hear a struggle on the other side of their door and chose not to inquire⁵, we can be fairly sure it didn't involve a woman screaming in agony and for help for the length of 38 stabs. But what is also neglected is the whole sequence of events from the point of view of the murderer. If the murder was premeditated the man would have to have been an idiot just to be taking the *chance* that she would be screaming.

Which is not only why I'm near to convinced that the wound to the heart, delivered by the larger blade, had been the initial, killing, in the least incapacitating one. It perfectly explains the noise having been kept to a minimum, and it clears the perpetrator from having been a complete moron. And it, too, strongly suggests clear premeditation.

Why the large blade indeed.

A rarer hypothesis has the murder being committed by two individuals. Very unlikely, as the image of one of them awaiting his turn for the kill while the other one is preoccupied with stabbing away 38 times immediately strikes one as somewhat absurd; it has something of a tutor-student relationship to it.

The most plausible, convincing and, as so often, simple excuse for the presence of the larger blade in that place at that time is *specific purpose*. The perpetrator having brought it along with the killing blow in mind – hence the clear premeditation.

The whole scenario would thus unfold as following:

A man wants to kill a woman. He leaves his lodgings with both the smaller knife and the large blade (alternatively he organises it or both weapons after leaving home). He meets Tabram, most likely before she turns into George Yard Buildings. They arrive on the first landing. Here he might have pushed her down – or trip her – or perhaps even ask her to lay down (I'm not at all clear about which), and as fast as he can stabs her in the heart with the larger blade; the relative precision of this wound would suggest to me that she was on the ground while receiving it. And then commences with stabbing her chest, belly, abdomen, genital region. Alternatively he could have caught her in her sleep.

Quick question to the self/selves in between: a murderer, who in all likelihood has his victim to go with him to a more or less secluded spot in the early morning hours, there first incapacitating his victim before carrying out whatever else he wants to do to the body for whatever reason – does that remind us of anyone?

The question about which of the blades had been used first is such an important one because it decides about the context of these weapons as well as about the context of the overall purpose. If you give my conclusions here a chance you'll have to wonder to what purpose the murderer would stab an already lifeless, if not dead, woman 38 times. And since you're on these pages here you'll rather sooner remember that this question doesn't pose the same kind of problem to you in the cases of Nichols, Chapman and following. If you allow the validity of the sequence of events as proposed above, we'll have a procedure that is pretty much identical with those familiar to us that occurred later. And if you're still categorically refuse Tabram as a victim of the same murderer, you'd have 2 individuals following basically the same procedure.

But a stab to the heart? Multiple stabs to chest, belly and abdomen, but no mutilations? How can that be even seen as similar?

I'd argue that this difference might be almost incidental, that it could be part of a larger, more overall sequence. That we see differences between the later murder victims is only a later extension of what I want to imply, but they're worth noting; they follow the logic of the progression of an individual that hasn't woken up one day, thinking, 'that's how I'm going to do it!' Think of the differences we see with Catherine Eddowes compared to Annie Chapman. Oddly enough many focus on the differences with the cut to the throat, while the one that really counts is the absence of strangling in Eddowes' case, which, since she was a conscious and likely struggling human being, is enough to sufficiently explain the difference of the cut to the throat. Not to mention her facial wounds. The whole line is progression.

But equally important are considerations of what came before. It is likely that whatever drove the murderer was vented in other ways before it evolved into murder, and I'm using the term 'evolve' quite consciously. As Ally Ryder put it so aptly in at least one podcast, he wouldn't have gone from 0 to 60⁶ (or from 0 to 100+, for those who don't count Kelly in). I'd also speculate that we might deal with a killer, who initially was himself not 100% positive about what precisely he wanted. If you ask a serial killer why he killed, as has been done, the reply is usually quite unsatisfying, in fact quite vague. A fledging serial murderer on the couch would probably even be vaguer about it.

In this light the difference between the wounds delivered to Martha Tabram and those done to the later victims appears less significant, in both cases we're looking at what is normally referred to as some savagery, and I could imagine the tendency on Tabram's body as going down (pure speculation), in any case the murderer simply not being where he'll be later.

The stab to the heart, with you still humouring me, is only different as a stab to the heart, but not in terms of purpose, which is to incapacitate the victim *in order* to commit what follows, the stab wounds to the rest of the body being the priority, what the perp really wants, although possibly not the full-fledged version yet, not yet a recognition completed.

Think of the larger blade to the heart as a precursor to the strangling and throat-cutting.

That this approach would then have been altered would be due to the specifics of what he wanted and how he was to go about it. A simple process of trial and error, of learning to specify method, of a killer finding himself in the dark, disturbed ways of his mind.

The choice of weapons follows the same line of thought. I wouldn't presume that the killer 'grew up' with his specific, ever to be preferred knife. Of course he could have swapped to another knife, learning from inconvenience, e.g. such as having to break through the sternum, and from mishaps. I wrote above that he likely killed her as quickly as possible, but just how quickly that would turn out to be not only depended on him, but also on circumstance, this mainly being the victim's response. Basically we're talking about refining.

To sum up:

the presence of the larger blade not only suggests clear premeditation, but the specific purpose of killing or at least incapacitating the victim first, for the other inflictions then to be delivered subsequently, a scenario supported by the absence of screams. This version of events pointing to the crime being of similar nature in regards to the later murders, with the difference of knives and specific means of incapacitation of the victim explained at least in theory by them constituting an earlier version of the same procedure, a serial murderer evolving.

I thus believe that if we accept this larger blade as being brought for the purpose of incapacitating Martha Tabram first, she'd be moved a significant deal closer to warranting an inclusion into the series of victims attributed to the serial murderer the world knows as 'Jack the Ripper', not in spite, but precisely *because* of that larger blade.

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Notes and references:

¹*Morning Advertiser, August 8th, 1888*

²*Yet another variation-bend in this line of thinking would have him following her and attacking her before this could happen, by which time we've gone quite out of our way to accommodate this version.*

³*Author Tom Wescott suggests in his article 'The Silence of Violence: A Witness to the Martha Tabram Murder Exposed', written for the Journal of the Whitechapel Society and re-posted on casebook.org, <http://www.casebook.org/dissertations/ws-silence-of-violence.html>, that George Yard Buildings' superintendent Francis Hewitt might have indeed heard Tabram arriving with her murderer, Hewitt's 'theory', which he gave to the Morning Advertiser on August 8th, essentially being a memory.*

⁴*The Times, August 10, 1888*

⁵*Tom Wescott, 'The Silence of Violence: A Witness to the Martha Tabram Murder Exposed', written for the Journal of the Whitechapel Society and re-posted on casebook.org, <http://www.casebook.org/dissertations/ws-silence-of-violence.html>*

⁶*My apologies, but I can presently not recall on which specific podcast Ally Ryder had made this apt remark, I would have to go through all of them that include her on the panel, please don't shoot me. The podcast belongs to the 'Rippercasts' as to be found on casebook.org:
<http://casebook.org/podcast/>*