



Kate Soffel's Life of Crime

A Gendered Journey from Warden's Wife
to Criminal Actress

—KRISTI GOOD

Many residents of Pittsburgh are well acquainted with the story of the “Biddle Boys,” Edward and John (Ed and Jack), who escaped from the Allegheny County Jail in winter 1902, with the help of the warden's wife, Kate Soffel. Their escape from the city and the ensuing horse-drawn sleigh chase across the snowy roads of Butler County thrilled newspaper readers across the country. The final confrontation between law enforcement and the “desperadoes,” as journalists characterized them, was a bloody shoot-out that left the Biddles and Soffel on the brink of death. Soffel survived, but the public's excitement about her role in these events waned much more quickly than did their enthusiasm for the event itself.

In *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills*, Jennifer Jones posits, “Idealized ‘woman’ has traditionally been constructed as self-sacrificing, passive, and nurturing; therefore, when actual women become violent, some sense must be made of their actions if the myth of feminine passivity is to be maintained.”¹ Jones cites as a major influence the work of Ann Jones, who, in her book *Women Who Kill*, analyzed how various historical murder trials have perpetuated the subordination of women. Jones builds on this feminist analysis by exploring the dramatic texts that spring from these criminal events and legal proceedings and argues that dramatic representations of female criminality serve as similar historical documentation to “contain and control cultural anxiety” regarding the abnormality of the criminal woman.²

The jailbreak itself was a public spectacle that held the interest of the American people from coast to coast, and a popular true-crime melodrama

by Theodore Kremer quickly followed the newspaper headlines. *A Desperate Chance* detailed the sensational events of the Biddle jailbreak and debuted in the same year as the escape. Kremer's play functions as Jones suggests: a morality play that warns women of "the dangers of self-determination" and encourages them to "embrace their submissive status."³ But Kremer wrote his play before Soffel served her jail time, and her determination to cultivate a public life for herself post incarceration was not consistent with the narrative of passive femininity that the media, the courts, and Kremer had constructed to assure society that this unnatural, criminal woman was no longer a moral threat. While *A Desperate Chance* played across the country for years following the crime, Soffel's attempt to reclaim her life through a career in the theatre was met with opposition, particularly in her home region. This article serves as an act of feminist reclamation by documenting Soffel's involvement with the Biddles as well as her attempt to reenter society, a period heretofore unexamined in her life, and intervenes in the current historical narrative by painting her as a model not of submissive femininity but of feminist subversion.

Peter Soffel and Kate Dietrich were married in the German Evangelical Protestant Church in Pittsburgh on December 9, 1886.⁴ They started a family within the first years of marriage and had four children. Aside from her duties as a mother, Soffel regularly ministered to men incarcerated at the Allegheny County Jail, where her husband was the warden. This was how she came into contact with Ed and Jack Biddle in 1901, as they sat waiting for their execution dates.

The Biddles were sentenced to execution for fatally shooting a Mount Washington grocer named Thomas Kahney during a robbery in April 1901. Police profiled the Biddles and an accomplice named Walter Dorman, who were understood to be members of a group of robbers known as the Chloroform Gang. The day following the shooting in Mount Washington, police arrested Dorman and his common-law wife, Jennie Seebers, at their residence. At another house nearby, authorities arrested Jack Biddle on the ground floor before a shoot-out began upstairs. By the end of the skirmish, a police officer was killed, Ed Biddle was in custody but close to death, and a woman named Jessie Bodyne was arrested while trying to flee.⁵

The Biddles were the only two of the group to be sentenced to execution; Dorman turned state's evidence in return for a penitentiary sentence, and both Seebers and Bodyne were released after being charged with receiving stolen property.⁶ Most accounts of Soffel's relationship with the Biddles suggest that Ed hypnotized her into helping them escape, but Soffel's confession shows a clear, reasoned approach to her involvement. She said, "I thought the purpose

and cause was just and forced by a Christian spirit. Ed told me he was innocent and each day it impressed itself upon me. I made up my mind he should not suffer innocently and I planned to help the boys.”⁷ The topic of hypnosis, particularly when used by criminals to coerce innocent individuals to do their bidding, was popular at the time, but the Biddles’ claim of innocence was not just a ploy directed at Soffel. Even on their deathbeds, with no hope of mesmerizing law enforcement, the brothers maintained their innocence. Ed claimed that Jennie Seebers was responsible for the Kahney murder, and Jack corroborated that while he was not present at the Kahney robbery, Ed and Dorman were there along with Seebers, who was dressed in men’s clothing.⁸ Without any additional evidence, this scenario seems plausible: Seebers could have been mistaken for a man during the robbery, and Dorman would have plenty of incentive to fabricate the Biddles’ involvement to save his common-law wife and commute his sentence.

The Biddles broke out of the Allegheny County Jail on January 30, 1902, with the help of Soffel, who provided saws, revolvers, and disguises. Their flight through the Butler County countryside in a horse-drawn sleigh ended in a violent confrontation with law officials on February 1, leaving both the Biddles and Soffel wounded: Jack shot by the police, and Ed and Soffel suffering from self-inflicted wounds. Officials took them to the Butler County Jail, and Soffel was eventually removed to the local hospital, under guard, when it appeared that she would make a full recovery.

Within the sensational narrative the newspapers created during the escape and capture of the criminals, the depiction of Soffel remains focused on her perceived frailties as a woman. Alongside the suggestion that Soffel had been hypnotized by Ed Biddle and had no agency whatsoever in the decision to facilitate their escape, the newspapers gleefully reported the discovery of a letter in Soffel’s possession that hinted she and Ed were having a romantic affair.⁹ The media narrative then shifted to focus on Soffel as a cheating wife and delinquent mother who had abandoned her family, rather than solely as a criminal who had helped convicts escape from jail. The *Salt Lake Herald* reported the events following Warden Soffel’s realization that his wife had played a part in the jailbreak. “Under the crushing grief of this discovery Mr. Soffel behaved in a most heroic manner. He at once made public the humiliating fact that he believed his wife to be responsible for the escape... Warden Soffel’s great mental suffering was visible to scores of persons who saw him, but he bore up manfully and attended to all the duties which the trying occasion imposed upon him.”¹⁰ Journalists depicted Warden Soffel as the victim-turned-hero, an individual who needed to regain his manhood after suffering humiliation at the hands of his wife.

Before the jailbreak, Warden Soffel had been warned very publicly that the burgeoning relationship between his wife and the Biddles was cause for concern. The *Herald* reported that a newspaper article two weeks before the jailbreak implied that Kate Soffel was “too much interested in the Biddles,” but the Warden “served notice on every one of the jail employes [*sic*] that his wife was to do just as she pleased inside the jail.”¹¹ The narrative proposes that Warden Soffel’s humiliation stemmed from the fact that his wife managed to deceive him. The media undermined the Warden’s masculinity by rendering him incapable of controlling his wife, rather than ineffectual at maintaining the security of his jail.

Officials incorrectly informed Warden Soffel on February 1 that his wife had died in the shoot-out in Butler County. The *Pittsburg Press*¹² recorded his reaction: “He fell into a chair, exclaiming: ‘It is God’s will! The poor, foolish woman! She has been punished.’ Later he said: ‘The woman has done wrong. Perhaps she has been punished by God. One thing that must be considered—she is the mother of my children. She will be brought to the house. She can do no further harm to mankind now. She will be laid to rest properly. She has done all the harm toward me she can, and I would far, far rather bring back her dead body to the home that she has wrecked than to have shame cast on the children by their mother’s imprisonment, which might have occurred.’”¹³ There are two types of punishment mentioned in this statement: lawful imprisonment and the reckoning of God. The warden references Soffel’s actual crime of aiding and abetting criminals, as well as the perceived crime of neglecting her societal duty to husband and family. He suggests the latter is more deserving of the wrath of God, clearly stating that it is better that she is dead in the “home that she has wrecked” than casting shame on the family by serving a prison sentence. Unfortunately for the warden’s pride, Soffel’s suicide attempt was foiled by a stay in her corset, which prevented the bullet from causing its intended fatal damage. She went on to serve one year and seven months at the Western State Penitentiary for her role in the Biddles’ escape.¹⁴

Until the capture of the fugitives, the excitement with which the public followed the case in the newspapers could only be estimated, but a physical manifestation soon made the scale of the fervor clear. Once authorities had captured the Biddles and Soffel, the public satisfied their curiosity by seeking out the captives in person. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported: “The excitement in the country is simply beyond description. Many people were so curious that they drove and rode to Butler last night....Shortly after midnight they began to arrive and the crowd was augmented from that time on until 6 o’clock, when it was estimated that fully seven thousand persons were standing in front of the large

oaken doors of the Butler County Jail... The Butler county fair, which is always famous for the crowds it draws, was scarcely ever such a drawing card as the Butler county jail to-day.¹⁵

The article stated that the crowd had “no other excuse except that they were attracted to the black fame” of the criminals.¹⁶ The *Inquirer* estimated that nearly two thousand people from the crowd—women especially—gained access to the building itself.

While physicians were dressing the Biddles' wounds women were admitted to the cell rooms. Sympathy was expressed on all sides for the dying murderers. Some women were even so bold as to lay their hands on their foreheads, and few had any hesitancy in talking to Jack Biddle and expressing their sorrow for him. Girls, mothers and wives wept, and had it not been for the prompt action of the jail guards yesterday afternoon two women would have fainted. The men visitors cared but little as to the dying pair. They came in from every door and were readily admitted to the cells. While the doctors were applying bandages or placing fresh cotton on the wounds of the Biddles thousands of the morbid curiosity-stricken men looked on. Even while the Rev. Father Walsh was administering the last sacred rites of the Roman Catholic Church men and women were admitted.¹⁷

The *Inquirer* justified the overwhelming appearance of women by saying that many believed in the Biddles' innocence, but this claim of morality is overshadowed by the sheer indecency of putting two dying men on display for entertainment purposes. Even the intimate ministrations of a holy sacrament did not warrant privacy.

The impropriety did not end here, as people sought objects related to the Biddle death as they would buy trinkets at a performance. Individuals who were eager to have a physical remembrance of the occasion found what they craved in a ten-foot-square section of snow and gravel by the south corner of the jail. Officials had unloaded Soffel and the Biddles here the preceding evening, and the area was covered in “no less than a half gallon of the life's blood of the trio,” reported the *Inquirer*.¹⁸ Souvenir-hunters had picked the stones clean by morning, going “so far as to get stones, wash them in the blood-covered snow, in order to preserve them as souvenirs of the occasion.”¹⁹

The Biddles both died on Saturday, February 1, and the officials exhibited the bodies in the hallway of the jail the following day. A “continuous stream” of people entered the jail for three hours to look at the bodies, and when the Biddles were removed to Pittsburgh the following day, a similar crowd waited at the train station for their arrival, where “there was a rough scramble to get to the platform of the depot, during which several were bruised by being crushed

against the stairway.”²⁰ The crowd followed the bodies to the morgue, but police prevented them from entering the building.

Given this spectacle, the popular playwright Theodore Kremer wasted no time in reaping the benefits of the Biddles’ scintillating tale. He submitted his dramatization of the Biddles’ escape, titled *A Desperate Chance*, to the Library of Congress for copyright on May 3, 1902, and it had begun playing in New York theatres by the fall. The melodrama’s four acts chronicled the tale of the Biddles from the Kahney murder to their escape and eventual death in the Butler County Jail. The *Cambridge Chronicle* reported on the play before its Boston opening in 1902, writing, “While Mr. Kremer has followed as near as practicable the facts of the case, he has of course elaborated and added until he has evolved a story of intense heart interest that cannot fail to entertain all lovers of the drama.”²¹

Kremer did, in fact, follow the details of the case very closely, even adding factual details like a play-by-play of the altercation between fugitives and guards during the jailbreak and the number of times each Biddle brother was shot during the standoff. Aside from a vague attempt to disguise the names of those involved, Kremer’s deviation from the facts to create “heart interest” lies in details that few, if any, individuals could know: intimate dialogue between characters and the eventual outcome of the historical event. The thematic through line of the jailbreak plot concerns character Ed Ribble’s hypnotic power over women. The now-common trope of a villain who uses hypnosis for personal gain was only in its infancy in 1902. George du Maurier’s 1895 novel, *Trilby*, which psychologist Deirdre Barrett credits as “the most influential prototype” for this irresponsible depiction of hypnosis in popular culture, introduced the iconic character of Svengali, a mesmerist who seduces and exploits the beautiful woman Trilby.²² Kremer’s dialogue paints his female characters as distinctly frail and submissive, a move he ultimately employs to gain sympathy for the character Kate and her inability to resist Ed’s persuasive powers.

In the first scene, Peter and Kate Loffler encounter Ed Ribble in Tom Kenny’s store, where Ed and his brother, Jack, are engaging in reconnaissance. All the women in the store are mesmerized by Ed, commenting on his “wonderful eyes” and “fascinating glances.”²³ Kate begins to swoon when Peter asks about Ed’s taste in women and he boldly replies, “Oh, about the same as your own.”²⁴ Peter is incensed and challenges Ed, who replies, “Oh, come Warden. I am not such a scarecrow as you intend to imply, whenever Ed Ribble makes up his mind to win and conquer a woman married or single he always succeeds. (*Folds arms looks passionately at Kate*).”²⁵ Before Peter can strike a blow, Kate calms him.

The end of the first act shows the confrontation between Kenny and the Ribbles during the robbery, and Ed shoots the grocer at point blank range, leaving no question for the remainder of the play that Ed is guilty. The second act takes place in the prison during visiting hours. Kate and Mrs. Pearce, a wealthy widow, stress their belief to the Warden that the Ribbles are innocent, even though a button from Ed's coat was found clutched in Kenny's hand. The Ribbles overhear and comment:

ED: (*Aside*) It's lucky that women have so little common sense!

JACK: (*Grinning*) Yes and such large charitable hearts! (*Snickers*)²⁶

Kate is visibly agitated throughout the scene, and when Peter forces her to stay with the Ribbles and cast her "sunny smiles"²⁷ to cheer them up, the audience sees that she has been trying to deliver revolvers and a saw for their jailbreak. Kate bemoans, "Oh, Ed, it if were not for the thought that I am convinced of your innocence I would despise myself!" but Ed assures her that "every Christian woman will admire you for rescuing an innocent man from the gallows!"²⁸

Kremer's bold assertion that Ed is, in fact, a murderer is underscored by Ed's violence and deceit throughout the play. Kate's willingness to believe him, as well as Kremer's depiction of women as ornaments who are valued for their "sunny smiles," casts her as a weak, gullible figure on whom hypnosis would be effective. Kremer shows throughout the scene that Kate's resolve to commit a crime wavers whenever she breaks contact with Ed. Barrett notes that power via eye contact is common in the "Svengali genre" because of its link to what animal behaviorists call the "copulatory gaze," or a practice of continuous eye contact that is certain to result in a violent or sexual act.²⁹ Kremer adds the following exchange, replete with melodramatic exclamations:

KATE: But remember, Ed, no violence!

ED: Don't you worry! You are the best and the bravest little woman in the world!

KATE: Oh, don't! Only Christian motives and the firm belief in your innocence prompt me to this desperate action!

ED: Don't say that, Kate! You love me! Look at me, and tell me that you love me. (*He looks fixedly at her.*)

KATE: (*Stares at him long, as if by an unseen power her hands leave her panting breast and steal up to his through bars. She utters as if in a trance.*) God help me, I DO love you!³⁰

Kremer's push toward the supernatural to show Ed's undeniable power is one of the devices he employs to build sympathy for Kate, rendering her a victim and

blameless for having broken the social code of submissive femininity. Another such device is the introduction of the character Clara, Peter and Kate Loffler's only child.

From the first scene, Clara is a model of childlike innocence and wisdom. She gravitates to Jack Ribble, who Kremer paints as a softer, more compassionate figure than Ed, and comes to visit him in the prison after Kate's emotional scene. Clara brings Jack a piece of cake from her own meal. Peter asks her why she isn't bringing cake to Ed as well.

CLARA: Well I don't like him so much!

PETER: Indeed, why?

CLARA: His eyes—they look at you so—so—you know around the corners!!

PETER: (Laughing) Yes, but that's what all the ladies admire so much!

CLARA: Oh, well I suppose I'm no lady!³¹

Kremer's depiction of childlike innocence is borne out in Clara's instinctual dislike of Ed, though this conceit suggests that once a female child reaches puberty, her innocence and good sense are compromised. Kremer implies that once a female body matures, her capacity for sexual desire strips her of her natural intelligence and she is fit only to satisfy a husband's sexual needs in the hopes of reproducing and becoming a mother.

These ideas are reinforced by the old guard, Biebrich, representing Kate Soffel's father, Conrad Dietrich, who was a guard at the Allegheny County Jail. Biebrich has noticed Kate's behavior with Ed and confronts her. He reminds her of her marriage vows and chastises her. "Do you comprehend that this unholy attachment will not only dishonor your husband, who trusts you, and disgrace your child, but also bring me, and the mother who bore you, to an early grave? Oh, Kate, dear forget that unnatural infatuation! Come back as you left us with a pure heart and unsullied! Ah, Kate don't waver! For God's sake don't hesitate! All our lives and happiness hang in the balance! Go back to the man who loves you! Back to the little one who honors you! (*Sobs violently*)"³² This passage makes clear that Biebrich thinks only that Kate is in love with Ed, not that she is plotting a crime. It is her sexual desire that will be responsible for the utter ruin of her husband, child, and parents.

The final act takes place in the Butler County Jail, as Ed and Jack lie dying and Kate is wounded. Father Walsh assures Peter that Kate's suicide attempt was not successful, and she is pleading for forgiveness. Father Walsh counsels Peter, "Remember, my son, she is only a weak woman!"³³ But Peter is resolved that he will divorce Kate, and Biebrich assures everyone that divorce is a worse parting

than death. Only Clara, robed in a white satin cloak, remains optimistic that her parents will make amends. A Detective Kindheart agrees with Clara and sympathizes with Kate. He says to Peter, "No one will blame her, sir. Ed Ribble's hypnotic power over women was a well-known fact. The public realizes this and will consider her a heroine."³⁴ Kremer uses Clara as a symbol of innocence and uses the aptly named Detective Kindheart to stress Kate's redeemable nature and Ed Ribble's insidious power. In his last moments, Ed acknowledges this as well and begs Kate for forgiveness, assuring her that her husband will take her back. Ed lives long enough to see Peter and Kate reunited by the hands of Clara, who pluckily delivers the final line of the play, "Ah, di'nt I tell you so!"³⁵

Without knowing how things would fall for the real Peter and Kate Soffel, Kremer gave their characters a fairy-tale ending where the crime was forgiven and the social order was restored. Seen as a historical document, by Jones's definition, *A Desperate Chance* reinforces traditional gender roles through imagining a conclusion to the then unfinished story of Kate Soffel's life, a conclusion that, as Jones says, functions by "reassuring the patriarchy that women embrace their submissive status."³⁶ In reality, Peter Soffel—now resigned from his post as warden and serving the Pittsburg Carnegie & Western Railroad as a right-of-way man³⁷—divorced Kate Soffel while she was incarcerated at Western State Penitentiary. In the libel suit, Mr. Soffel accused her of having an affair with Ed Biddle during the brief period between the jailbreak and their capture.³⁸ James and Theodosia Stevenson, the owners of the hotel in Mt. Chestnut where Kate Soffel and the Biddles rested during their flight, testified during an extensive line of questioning that the bed in the room Kate and Ed occupied for approximately an hour and a half appeared to have been slept in by two people.³⁹ The jury granted the divorce and gave custody of all four children to Peter Soffel.⁴⁰

Kremer successfully capitalized on the true-crime genre, and the melodrama was still playing regularly across the country at the time of Soffel's release. In fact, the play was so popular that it was regularly performed up until 1908. But Kremer wasn't the only person inspired by the true story of the Biddles and Kate Soffel; a manager by the name of Louis Lesser visited Soffel toward the end of her incarceration to propose a new career as an actress. Perhaps Lesser imagined himself as theatre producer David Belasco and Soffel as Mrs. Leslie Carter, the famed socialite-turned-actress. Belasco's work with the New York School for Acting (NYSA), which he cofounded in 1885, focused on developing emotional range, especially in actresses. Kim Marra explains in *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in American Theatre, 1865–1914* that the NYSA's mission was "one of moral and social uplift with particular concern for the reputations

of young women who sought a livelihood in the theatre.”⁴¹ The correlation between actresses and promiscuity was still strong in this era, Marra notes, due to persistent Victorian gynecological theories that connected elevated emotional states with overstimulated reproductive organs. Hence, an actress who was capable of giving a passionate performance could do so only because she was in a state of sexual arousal. An actress could legitimize her skill and repair her reputation, however, if it was understood that she was under the tutelage of a master such as Belasco and his colleagues. Marra comments on Belasco’s “Svengali-like influence” over actresses such as Carter, who, though requiring extensive social rehabilitation after a very public and salacious divorce trial, went on to a theatrical career of great esteem.⁴²

Regardless of whether Lesser had any concern for rehabilitating Soffel’s reputation, he must have counted on her infamy to draw interest. An article in the *Saint Paul Globe* suggests as much with its headline “Mrs. Soffel to Act: Woman Who Helped Biddles Escape Goes on Stage.” The article states that Soffel had been training for her stage career since her release from the penitentiary and that she would be joining a company to play the lead role in a play called *A Daring Woman* by Vic Calver, which the article assured readers had “nothing in it to recall the Biddle tragedy.” The true content of the play is a mystery, as it appears the physical script no longer exists, but the article describes, “The scenes are laid in Montana and California, and Mrs. Soffel will appear in the character of Agnes Gray, a noble but misunderstood woman without a past.”⁴³

The play was slated to open in late January 1904 at the Colonial Theatre in Connellsville, some fifty miles east of Pittsburgh, but there was already trouble in the surrounding area. The managers of Gamble’s Opera House in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, had refused to book the play, and while the play was slated to open in nearby Charleroi, there was a petition to have management cancel the performance.⁴⁴

It is not clear who began the petition to stop the Charleroi performance, or why. Peter Oresick, an author and editor who dedicated much of his life to compiling a bibliography of books, films, and plays that showcase Pittsburgh, suggests that the content of Calver’s play changed dramatically after the communities in Charleroi and Monongahela raised objections. The newspaper article describing these boycotts lists the play as *A Dangerous Woman*, which was the title under which it was billed in the December 1903 booking announcement in the *New York Clipper*.⁴⁵ All other newspaper articles list the play as *A Daring Woman*, and Oresick proposes that Calver altered the content and title due to this local backlash.⁴⁶ The *Globe*’s pointed disclaimer, that the play had “nothing in it to recall the Biddle tragedy,” alludes to this possibility. Because

the *Globe's* brief description does not contain anything that appears objectionable by reasonable standards, Oresick's hypothesis seems likely; Calver eliminated the scandalous material from the script, while Soffel remained in the cast.

While the sources of the Charleroi and Monongahela unrest remain unclear, the major force behind the interruption of the opening night in Connellsville was the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which did not want Mrs. Soffel to appear. "The Connellsville W. C. T. U. was up in arms the moment the bills were posted, and immediately called a public meeting to enter a protest against Mrs. Soffel appearing upon the Connellsville stage. In the notices calling the meeting the W. C. T. U. says, 'A momentous question faces Connellsville. Will we put a premium on vileness and lawlessness?'"⁴⁷ The local burgess stated publicly that his "sympathies are wholly with the W. C. T. U.," but there was no legal way he could stop Soffel from performing without the possibility of being liable for thousands of dollars in damages, should Soffel decide to sue the borough.⁴⁸ However, they could take legal action if she actually set foot on the stage. Soffel's manager, Lesser, and the manager of the theatre, George Challis, were served with the following notice: "You are hereby notified that if you allow, permit, or are responsible for or concerned in the production of the play, 'A Daring Woman,' in which Mrs. Kate Soffel of Pittsburg appears or takes part, in any theatre in Fayette county, Pennsylvania, you will be prosecuted for committing a public act in violation of decency and morality."⁴⁹

The company prepared for opening night, but Soffel never made it to the stage. A Detective McBeth arrested her in her dressing room before the curtain went up. Lesser and Challis demanded to see a warrant, which McBeth claimed to have but would not produce. Soffel was already in costume, and the stage manager held the curtain in the hopes that the show would go on. Lesser and Challis placed a call to the district attorney to dispute the premature arrest, but "after hours of argument," Soffel was not allowed to appear onstage, and the stage manager read her part.⁵⁰ The situation reached a wide audience, with New York City's *The Sun* reporting, "The audience clamored for the appearance of Mrs. Soffel. There was much disorder in the house as the result of her non-appearance."⁵¹

The jury found Soffel, Lesser, and Challis guilty of publicly violating decency and morality, despite their failure to actually break the law. While one newspaper defended Soffel by saying that she had already "paid the penalty of her crime," the opposition was successful.⁵² Yes, Soffel had served her time for her role in the jailbreak, but had she made amends for the social crime of deviating from submissive femininity? Kremer's *A Desperate Chance*, when viewed as a historical document, reinforced Soffel's crime as an unnatural female act,

one for which she had been legally convicted and served time. However, Soffel's physical presence in *A Daring Woman* undermined that lawful and social verdict by giving her the agency to remake and present herself not as a fallen woman but in the guise of her character Agnes Gray, "a noble but misunderstood woman without a past," and as a skilled artist intent on living her life as she pleased without regard for social expectation. Lesser was no Belasco, and Soffel's brief training as an actor was not enough to rehabilitate her feminine image. It appears that the prosecution's case against her performance cited an example of immorality other than the Biddle jailbreak; the district attorney requested Soffel's divorce proceedings to use as evidence against her.⁵³ In case her crime of aiding and abetting murderers was not enough to convince a jury that she was amoral or indecent, the district attorney hedged his bets by including her failure as a woman to remain faithful to her husband and children.

Soffel would ultimately face another injunction, instigated by the Washington Ministerial Association, which prevented her from performing anywhere in Washington County, Pennsylvania. She encountered a mixture of opposition and acceptance during the rest of her tour, which ended in May 1904. She retired to Pittsburgh, took up seamstress work, and died of typhoid fever on August 30, 1909.⁵⁴ Soffel has since been reduced to folklore in the city of Pittsburgh—a ghost haunting the second floor of her former-home-turned-restaurant—while the Biddle Brothers are commemorated more publicly, lending their surname to a street, a biking trail, an official government building, and a popular coffee shop, Biddle's Escape. Soffel and her unnatural crimes—more unnatural, it seems, than a pair of murderous brothers on death row—are virtually erased in the historical record to assuage cultural unease surrounding female criminality. Kremer capitalized on the major event of her life, writing one of the most lucrative plays of his career, while Soffel was legally and socially condemned for the role she played, both in real life and on the stage. This essay details for the first time Soffel's refusal to adhere to the submissive role society required of her following such a moral breach and reframes it as a radical act of feminist subversion.

Notes

1. Jennifer Jones, *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), x.
2. *Ibid.*, ix–x.

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3. Ibid., xv, xii.
4. "United in Marriage," December 9, 1886, File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA. Special thanks to archivist Sierra Green for making me aware of this collection.
5. James A. McKee, *20th Century History of Butler and Butler County, Pa. and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Richmond Arnold Publishing Company, 1909), 123–24. Several articles from the time refer to the members of the Chloroform Gang by different names, and it is never clear as to which are legal names and which are aliases. Walter Dorman is also known as Robert Wilcox, and his common-law wife Jennie Seebers is alternately known as Jennie Wilcox. The Biddles went by the alias surname Wright, and several publications claimed that Jessie Bodyne (alternately Bodine), went by the alias Jessie Wright, because she was married to one of the Biddles, though which brother was never made clear.
6. "May Be the Biddles," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), January 31, 1902.
7. "Mrs. Soffel Confessed Her Crimes," *Pittsburg Press*, February 1, 1902.
8. Ibid.
9. "Women Sympathized with Murderers," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 2, 1902.
10. "Warden Was Warned."
11. Ibid.
12. The city of Pittsburgh added the "h" to its spelling in 1911. In this essay, the earlier spelling without the "h" is used if the name is used in a proper title or if a publication from the time is quoted. The current spelling with the "h" is used all other times.
13. "Mrs. Soffel Confessed."
14. "Mrs. Kate Soffel Dead," *New York Times*, August 31, 1909.
15. "Women Sympathized."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. McKee, 123–24; "Warden Was Warned."
21. "Theatres: Grand Opera House," *Cambridge (MA) Chronicle*, February 28, 1903.
22. Deirdre Barrett, "Hypnosis in Popular Media," *Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy* (Santa Barbara: Praeger 2010), 77.
23. Theodore Kremer, *A Desperate Chance*, unpublished manuscript, Library of Congress copyright entry, May 3, 1902, 9.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Ibid., 14.
26. Ibid., 23.
27. Ibid., 24.
28. Ibid., 27, 28.
29. Barrett, "Hypnosis in Popular Media," 79.
30. Kremer, *A Desperate Chance*, 30.
31. Ibid., 40–41.
32. Ibid., 46.

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33. Ibid., 72.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Ibid., 90.
36. Jones, *Medea's Daughters*, xii.
37. "Peter Soffel Testimony," October 24, 1902, File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh.
38. "Peter K. Soffel vs. Kate Soffel, nee Kate Dietrich," August 1902, File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh.
39. "Stevenson Deposition," February 21, 1903, File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.
40. "Verdict," October 21, 1903, File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.
41. Kim Marra, *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in American Theatre, 1865-1914* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 160.
42. Ibid., 178.
43. "Mrs. Soffel to Act: Woman Who Helped Biddles Escape Goes on Stage," *Saint Paul Globe*, January 19, 1904.
44. "Management Commended," *Daily Republican* (Monongahela, PA), January 20, 1904.
45. Ibid.
46. Peter Oresick, interview with Kristi Good, personal interview, Pittsburgh, February 18, 2015.
47. "Mrs. Soffel, 'Back up!'" *Daily Gazette and Bulletin* (Williamsport, PA), January 22, 1904.
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49. Ibid.
50. "Mrs. Soffel Bluffed by a Lot of Officers," *Mail* (Hagerstown, MD), January 29, 1904.
51. "Mrs. Soffel Didn't Act: Woman Who Helped the Biddles to Escape Arrested in Theatre," *Sun* (New York, NY), January 24, 1904.
52. "Mrs. Soffel, 'Back up!'"
53. "Alfred E. Jones to George M. Stosock, Esq.," March 6 or 16, 1904 (writing illegible), File 1996.0079, Detre Library & Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA.
54. "Mrs. Kate Soffel Dead."

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