

**DEEDS AGAINST  
NATURE: WOMEN AND  
CRIME IN STREET  
LITERATURE OF EARLY  
MODERN ENGLAND**

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This paper examines some representations of women who kill in early modern news writing, including pamphlets, ballads, and some domestic tragedies, and considers how they were shaped to fulfil certain cultural functions. The situation of such women, particularly those who murdered their husbands or their children, was problematic in a culture where such behaviour lay far outside the boundaries of what was considered natural to each sex. In this period gender roles were clearly defined, and the ideology of the “good woman” informed the culture in various ways, both in legislation and at a popular level in social life and cultural practices. News writing, however sensational, was at this time invariably informed by a didactic imperative, and where possible structured so as to constitute evidence for a providentialist vision of human life. According to such a vision, even the most deviant of criminal acts might be utilised to reveal the mercy of God and the value of penitence. I discuss accounts of two kinds of female crime, husband murder and infanticide, in order to consider the narrative strategies whereby the writers attempt both to handle the difficult question of female agency and to render the crimes culturally intelligible.

This paper deals with a topic of perennial fascination: women who kill. Images of such women acquire and retain a potency rarely accorded to those of men; murders by men have to be deemed exceptionally horrific, as for example those committed by serial killers, to achieve the same notoriety, whereas women who kill are still, by nature, exceptional. In modern Britain, the face of Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged for murder in 1955 is still a familiar one, and her story was made into a play and two films. More notorious still is Myra Hindley, the so-called Moors murderess, who was sentenced in 1965 for her part in the killings of several children, and still remains in jail, one of the country’s longest-serving prisoners. Whenever the possibility of her release is mooted, there is a huge public outcry.

In early modern England, when news in printed form designed for a large-scale readership was only beginning to develop, accounts of murders committed by women assumed an importance entirely disproportionate in relation to their

actual occurrence. For example, statistics on domestic homicide in this period show that the murder of wives by husbands was at least twice as common as the reverse, but the actuality is by no means reflected in the accounts of domestic murder in pamphlets, ballads, and plays (Dolan 1994). Crime news, then as now, typifies the preference of all news for the deviant over the normal. It rejoices in what is sensational, exploiting the elements of deviance in what is constructed as the criminal performance, or spectacle. And women who killed literally constituted a public spectacle of extraordinary interest. In a pamphlet of 1608 the appearance in London of a woman thought guilty of murder (erroneously so, as it turned out) is greeted by a large and eager crowd assembled specially to see her:

Such was the desire of all eyes to see her, that their eyes might beare witness if women could bring forth a woman so detestable, as she was, being carried through the streets, the people that came to behold her were infinite.

*(The Apprehension, Arraignment, and Execution of Elizabeth Abbot, alias Cebrooke, for a cruell and horrible murther, 1608)*

The execution of Anne Sanders for the murder of her husband was attended by “so great a number of people as the lyke hath not bene seene there together in any mans remembrance, for almost the whole fields, and all the way from Newgate, was as full of folke as coulde well stande by one another” (Golding 1577: 170).

Although strong efforts were made to induce all condemned criminals to make an open and public confession, there was a special concern that women should be seen to do so, and the justice of the state thus vindicated. In Elizabeth Abbot’s case, the anonymous reporter is anxious to testify to the fairness of the proceedings:

I cannot with silence pass over, the care which our honourable Magistrates, tooke of her soule, labouring by all meanes to have her make it plaine by confession, which was so cleere by evidence. (sig. C3)

But Abbot refused to comply, and even at the place of execution, as the reporter notes with some exasperation, “she persisted in her deniall.”

What I hope to do in this paper is to draw some tentative conclusions about representations of women who kill in early modern street literature, and to consider the cultural function of such representations; in particular, to explore ways in which the problematic situation created when a woman acts so far outside the boundaries of what culture deems natural to her gender is resolved in the narratives of pamphlets, ballads, and plays so as to affirm a providentialist vision of human life. This will involve some brief consideration of the relationship of this writing to changing concepts of social disorder and of

female agency. I have used two separate terms to denote the body of texts which I discuss: news, and street literature. The notion of street literature is often used now<sup>1</sup> to invoke ideas of a large body of anonymous popular writing, produced in cheap formats, and designed to be sold in the open, at markets and fairs, hawked by pedlars and chapmen, in towns and throughout the countryside; in ballad form, this material could be delivered orally, by street performers, and thus might appeal to those who could not read. Plays, which dramatised recent domestic events, functioned similarly to ballads in this respect, conveying news, in the form of a particular representation of a sensational crime to a large number of individuals simultaneously. The term “news” carries ideological implications. There are, of course, huge differences between the operations of modern news media and those of the informal, irregular, and inconsistently regulated production of news in the early modern period, and it is also important that topicality was not necessarily a particular attraction of early modern forms of news. Nonetheless, Raymond Williams’ s view of newspapers as “a signifying system through which necessarily... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” seems appropriate to the media with which I am concerned (Williams 1981). This early news writing functions ideologically, like all news, by bringing events into an already constituted “realm of meanings” (Hall 1973: 337) in order to make them culturally intelligible. The status of news writing and street literature generally at this time was in dispute, it was a source of profit and in demand by printers for whom it was said (by Nashe) that small pamphlets such as almanacs were “readier money than ale or cakes” (Nashe 1958: 3, 105), but at the same time the writers and purveyors of such material were universally reviled, and the popular appetite for it seen as greedy and diseased. But the writers themselves regularly drew attention to the moral and social functions of their work —its role in revealing the ubiquity of God’s guiding providence, its revelation of hidden misdeeds, its correction of rumour and false report. And in some ways the stories of crimes committed by women might be shaped to serve these purposes particularly well.

Representations of such crimes were much sought after in this period, and a particularly notorious crime, such as the murders by Alice Arden, Anne Sanders and Eulalia Page (in the Page of Plymouth case) of their husbands or those of children committed by the innkeeper’s wife Annis Dell or, in the later seventeenth century, the midwife Mary Compton, would generate numerous accounts in different literary forms. For example, the murder of Thomas Arden, committed in 1551, was retold in chronicles by Stowe and Holinshed, a play of 1592, a ballad of 1633, and mentioned in tracts and pamphlets for nearly a hundred years afterwards. In a pamphlet of 1635, *The Adultrresses Funerall*

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<sup>1</sup>For example by Joy Wiltenberg (1992).

*Day*, it is mentioned in passing as one of the many terrible crimes of modern times, worthy of a place in “a most approved Chronicle,” although by this time it belonged to an earlier age, more than 80 years before. At this point I want to consider certain aspects of the cultural formation of early modern England which clarify the basis for contemporary assumptions about what constituted normal women’s behaviour, and hence the particular nature of the impact of women’s crimes such as these. They are: the ideology of the “good woman” as wife and as mother as defined theoretically, and its implications for gender relations; and various types of social evidence for the strength and influence of this ideology in practice, including legislation.

The “good woman” as defined in sermons and conduct books from the Middle Ages on, was chaste, modest, obedient; she was patient and long-suffering; her voice, like Cordelia’s, was “ever soft, gentle, and low.” A well-known seventeenth-century mother’s advice book, *The Mothers Legacies* (1624) by Elizabeth Jocelin, advocates an upbringing in domestic duties and moral virtue for her daughter:

I desire her bringing up may be learning the Bible... good housewifery, writing, and good workes: other learning a woman needs not. (sig. B6)

Marriage in post-Reformation England was the ideal condition for an adult woman, and in marriage a good woman acknowledged her secondary role; William Perkins, in *Christian Oeconomy* (1590), calls the wife “the other married person, who being subject to her husband yieldeth obedience to him,” one who is “wholly to depend on him, both in judgment and will.”<sup>2</sup> The ideal woman was the good mother, and in the Bible St Paul says that although woman transgressed first in Eden, “she shall be saved in child-bearing” (1 Timothy 2.15). This whole conception was predicated on a view of woman as weak and inferior, requiring both support and control, which was institutionalised in the Homily on Matrimony, written to be read out in parish churches as officially sanctioned doctrine of the Anglican church. It stated that:

The woman is a weak creature, not endued with the like strength and constancy of mind [as men]: therefore they be the sooner disquieted, and they may be more prone to all affections and dispositions of mind, more than men be; and lighter they be and more vain in their fantasies and opinions.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, for a woman to assume power, except within the circumscribed sphere of the household, was questionable, and in that context there was considerable scope for problems to arise. It has been suggested that the role of the mother itself was becoming a cause of anxiety at this time, and undergoing

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<sup>2</sup>Cited from Keith Wrightson (1982: 90).

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Simon Shepherd (1985: 25).

changes in ways that relate quite directly to constructions of the woman as criminal (Willis 1995). Among the elite, these changes stem from the increasing exercise by mothers of their legal rights to make decisions about property and inheritance, sometimes to the disadvantage of their children. More generally, a new emphasis in conduct literature on the role of the wife as “nurturer and caretaker of small children” (17) is thought in part responsible for “a new sense of women’s potential for... malevolent nurture” (18), which is often reflected in representations of the infanticidal mother.

A woman’s role as wife might also be open to paradoxical division; the Homily on Matrimony hints at its duality, when the woman was allowed to exercise power over the children, but required to submit to her husband:

To obey is another thing than to control or command; which yet they may do to their children and to their family; but as for their husbands, them they must obey. (Shepherd 1985: 26)

In Post-Reformation England the state of matrimony was highly valued, and for a woman marriage was exalted over the pre-Reformation idealization of virginity. But the combination of power and subservience in the wife’s position could prove problematic; in *The Mothers Blessing* (1616), a popular conduct book written by an educated gentlewoman, Dorothy Leigh, husbands are advised on the delicate balance to be maintained in relations with their wife: “If she be thy wife, she is always too good to be thy servant, and worthy to be thy fellow.” As the literature of husband-murder shows, there was a potentially dangerous ambiguity in the definition of a wife’s power relative to her husband’s. This was particularly so in a cultural climate where women’s power was commonly perceived as disorder, and conversely, “their disorderliness as power.” (Wiltenberg 1992: 7)

For the requirement for female obedience in marriage was believed to be directly antithetical to women’s natural inclination, and sustainable only by “vigilant suppression of their unruly drives” (98). The “good woman” was constructed as a model for women to aspire to; but their natural propensities, as daughters of Eve, were believed to run counter to it, as the popularity of such contemporary female stereotypes as the scold, the shrew, the gossip and the witch demonstrates. The basis for such stereotypes is male anxiety about women’s power and disorderliness, particularly sexual disorderliness. Chastity was the preeminent virtue of the good woman —“a woman that is truly chaste is a great partaker of all other vertues,” wrote Dorothy Leigh, in *The Mothers Blessing*;<sup>4</sup> “If chastity bee once lost, there is nothing left prayse-worthy in a woman” (M.R., *The Mothers Councell*) (Beilin 1987: 283). The concern with

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<sup>4</sup>Cited in Elaine Beilin (1987: 298).

chastity was not due purely to the economics of a patriarchal society, where a man needed to ensure the succession of his truly-begotten heirs; it was also a reflection of the view that a woman's being was centred in her sexuality, and that her representative vice was adultery. If a woman lost her reputation for chastity, then nothing else mattered.

That this belief-system was deeply interiorised in early modern England is evident in social history. It influences numerous pieces of legislation, two branches of which are particularly relevant here. The first concerns the different punishments for husband-murder and for wife-murder where the former was deemed the more heinous as an act of rebellion against natural order. In law from the mid-fourteenth century on, husband-murder was defined as petty treason, a separate crime from murder as such, and analogous to high treason, the intent to assault or the assaulting of a monarch and his government. The Statute of Treasons, dated 1352 (not abolished until 1838) provided that "if any servant kill his Master, if any woman kill her husband, or any secular or religious person kill his Prelate to whom he oweth obedience, this is treason."<sup>5</sup> The reason for differentiating between murder by spouses, according to a legal handbook of the period (Michael Dalton, *The Countrey Justice*, 138)<sup>6</sup> is that "the one is in subjection and oweth obedience, and not the other." The punishment for a woman who committed petty treason was the same as that for anyone who committed treason against the monarch: burning at the stake. In contrast to this specific attention accorded to wives by the Statute of Treasons, within the state of marriage women had no legal position, no rights; they "ceased to exist as legal individuals" (Amusen 1988: 72). In legal terminology the married woman was a "feme covert," that is "veiled, as it were, clouded and overshadowed" (T. E. *The Lawes Resolution of Womens' Rights*).<sup>7</sup> Man and wife became one person, and, legally, that person was the husband. The husband's legal preeminence was further confirmed in a sexually discriminatory Act of 1650 which made adultery by the wife a capital offence.

The second branch of legal discourse concerning the punishment of women for criminal behaviour interpreted as sexually transgressive was the Statute of 1624, "An Act to prevent the destroying and murthuring of bastard children," (21 James 1 c. 27), according to which "a woman who had concealed the death of her bastard child was presumed to have murdered it," and condemned to death (Jackson 1994: 21). Previously those suspected of murdering new-born infants were tried according to common-law rules of evidence, by which the prosecution had first to prove that the child had been born alive before

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<sup>5</sup>Cited in Dolan (1994: 21).

<sup>6</sup>Cited in Dolan (1994: 22).

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Dolan (1994: 27).

proceeding to the question of murder. Under the new act, which in effect criminalised unmarried women who bore children, the onus was on the plaintiff to prove that the child hadn't been born alive, which was not the case for married women. Some historians of the period write of an "infanticide wave" (Sharpe 1984: 64) in seventeenth century England which have might have been responsible for the deaths of more women than the witchcraft craze. Analogies between infanticide, as constructed by this act, and witchcraft are suggestive: both are crimes of the socially marginalised woman associated with deviant behaviour, particularly sexual, which has to be concealed. Women found guilty of either act were commonly described as "lewd."

That disorderly sexual behaviour was an issue of concern at a popular level appears from such cultural practices as the skimmington ride, a rural ritual in which the wife who beat or dominated her husband, along with the shamed husband, were represented by dressed up effigies seated backwards on a horse and drawn through the public streets to the accompaniment of mocking music. Women found guilty of outspoken and offensive speech, known as scolds, were subjected to public punishments such as ducking in ponds or rivers; in parish records such a woman is referred to as "a settler of discord through her evil tongue," a person who "abused her tongue," or "one suspected to live incontinently and to be busy with her tongue and unquiet" (Emmison 1973: 57, 64). Communities played an important part in law enforcement in this period, both in the detection of crimes and malpractices and in the legal processes themselves.<sup>8</sup> In particular they policed sexual conduct, especially women's; pamphlets of husband-murder or infanticide often refer to the crucial part played by a neighbour in the discovery of the crime. For example, in Thomas Kyd's account of the murder of John Brewen, a goldsmith, by his wife Anne, the crime goes undetected until neighbours overhear an argument between Anne and her lover John Parker, who persuaded her to commit the crime. Anne wants John Parker to marry her; he refuses:

Out arrant queane! (quoth he); thou wouldst marry me to the end that thou mightest poyson me, as thou didst thy husband; but for that cause I meane to keepe me as long out of thy fingers as I can, and accurst be I, if I hazard my life in thy hands. Why, thou arrant beast (quoth shee), what did I then, which thou didst not provoke me to do? if my husband were poysoned (shameles as thou art) it had never been done but for thee... These speeches thus spoken betweene them in vehemencie of spirite, was overheard of some that revealed it to the magistrates... and then she and Parker were both arraigned and condemned for the murder. (Kyd 1863: 1, 14-15)

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<sup>8</sup>For more detail, see Malcolm Gaskill (2000: chapter 7).

Similarly the testimony of neighbours is crucial in convicting Mary Goodenough, a widow of Oxford, of responsibility for the death of her newborn illegitimate baby:

They declar'd; and she acknowledg'd... that she call'd not out for Help [at the birth], and as also with relation to the Child afterwards, That it perish'd for want of suitable Help and Attendance. (*Fair Warning to Murderers of Infants*, 1692:1)

Juries then, which were of course all male, had considerable power to determine punishments, and so the extent to which a female plaintiff presented herself in conformity with accepted gender stereotypes could be crucial to her fate. Although Margaret Ferneseede, who was a London brothel-keeper, denied, even at the stake, that she had murdered her husband Anthony, and there was no direct evidence to convict her, she was still burnt, because two men lodging at her house heard her through the walls arguing with her husband and testified at the trial that she had called her husband “slaue and villaine” and had said the words “I will before God be reuenged of him (nay ere long) by one meanes or other” (Anonymous 1609: sig. B4). The author of the pamphlet states that “Among many other circumstances that was availablest to condemne her, this was one and the chiefest” (*The Araigment and Burning of Margaret Ferne-seede*, sig. B4).

Popular belief, then, as exemplified in neighbourly watchfulness or the behaviour of witnesses and juries in trials, could be a powerful instrument in the regulation of sexual conduct. Communal norms helped maintain sexual discipline, and recent studies of women’s history show how women themselves often assumed responsibility for the “sexual honour” of their community (Kermode & Walker 1994: 13), keeping a watchful eye especially on the behaviour of their own sex. In the absence of a regular police force, prosecutions often came about through the actions of those offended by deviant behaviour; and the lack of distinction in the period between crime and sin (as can be seen in the legislation of infanticide and adultery) helped to make it a litigious age. There was a contemporary perception that order was breaking down, which focussed on gender relations, though modern historians are not all agreed that such a crisis existed in reality.<sup>9</sup> Those who do, speak of “a ferment in the ordering of relations between the sexes” (Wiltenberg 1992: 215) and record a sense that sexual laxity was on the increase (Bridenbaugh 1968: 355). They also note a change in the pattern of concerns about the causes of disorder mid-century, in that “these concerns cease to be displaced directly onto women”

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<sup>9</sup>Modern historians who do take this view of gender relations include Carl Bridenbaugh (1968), David Underdown (1985) Dolan (1994) and Wiltenburg (1992). For an opposed view see Garthine & Walker (1994: 71).



(Dolan 1994: 17) after about 1660. In accounts of domestic violence the interest starts to shift from the adulterous wife to the transgressive husband,<sup>10</sup> and stories of wife-murder take over from those of husband-murder, perhaps concomitant with “a change in the audience’s sensitivity to the dangers of male or female disorderliness in marriage” (Wiltenberg 1992: 221). Attitudes to infanticide also shift, though a little later. Whereas in the seventeenth century it is widely assumed that “pregnant, unmarried women were lewd and sinful, that only lewd and unnatural women would murder their children,” in the early eighteenth century “the suspects were more often described as modest, and sometimes virtuous, women than as lewd harlots,” and the argument that only modest women would feel the degree of shame necessary to drive them to kill their babies starts to appear (Jackson 1994: 70).

After this very summary construction of a context in ideology and in social history for a discussion of women as murderers in the early modern period, I want now to examine more directly the ways in which accounts of husband-murder and infanticide in news and street literature are written up so as to render what are regarded as acts of the gravest sexual disorder “culturally intelligible” (Wiltenberg 1992: 209). I will discuss first the literature of husband-murder, then that of child-killing, and draw them together with some tentative conclusions about their functions.

Accounts of husband-murder are especially prominent between 1590 and about 1630 (214). The murder of Thomas Arden of Faversham by his wife Alice, dramatised in a play of 1592, was the most frequently cited example of the period, and Alice’s role was to become emblematic. As Catherine Belsey sees it, this is not so much on account of the violence involved or the degree of premeditation (Arden, a wealthy landowner is murdered by Alice, her lover Mosby, and six other people including two hired assassins), but on account of the “scandal... in Alice Arden’s challenge to the institution of marriage” (Belsey 1985: 130). Alice murders her husband because she wants power over her own sexuality; she loves another man.

... nothing could enforce me to the deed  
 But Mosby’s love. Might I without control  
 Enjoy thee still, then Arden should not die;  
 But seeing I cannot, therefore let him die. (ll. 273-6)

Chronicle sources for the crime suggest that Arden was a complaisant cuckold; Alice was of higher social status than he, and he benefitted from the social prestige she brought to the marriage. But in the play he stands unequivocally for the notion of the husband’s proprietary control of his wife’s

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<sup>10</sup>See Lena Cowen Orlin (1994: 238), and Wiltenburg (1992: Chapter 9).

body. His rights over Alice are absolute, and he regards Mosby, her low-born lover, as someone out to rob him by “base brokage” (1.26), and to usurp his sovereign position in his household. Alice encourages Mosby in his insurrectionary ambition, and so becomes a petty traitor, as envisaged by the law, against Arden’s authority. Domestic and political order are analogous. Alice declares rebelliously:

Sweet Mosby is the man that hath my heart,  
 And he [Arden] usurps it, having nought but this,  
 That I am tied to him by marriage.  
 Love is a god and marriage is but words,  
 And therefore Mosby’s title is the best. (1.98-103)

Marriage becomes the site of a struggle for power, and Alice’s resistance to her husband’s authority is one conspicuous model for the depiction of marital discord in popular literature. The progression from adultery to murder is a key feature of the story; Alice’s irregular behaviour in one area almost inevitably leads to the other. This reflects the early modern view of woman’s insatiable sexual appetite, and the uncontrollable quality of her passionate nature, once aroused. In a pamphlet with a similar narrative to that of the Arden story, *A Briefe Discourse of Two Most Cruell and Bloudie Murthers* (1583), Mrs Beast, wife to the well-reputed Thomas Beast, “an honest Husband-man,” falls in love with her husband’s handsome young servant, Christopher Tomson:

Often times they would carnally acquaint themselves together, till lust had gotten so much power of the Woman: as she began altogether to loathe and dislike her Husband... so much, as she must needs seeke and practise the death of her Husband. (B2v)

She persuades Christopher Tomson to undertake this, and sharpens the stake with which he murders Thomas Beast in the forest. In prison the lovers parade their passion; she sends him love tokens and he carries around a lock of her hair. Both are executed, Mrs Beast burnt at the stake. “Oh most horrible and wicked Woman, a woman, nay a devill” (B3), exclaims the author, who urges “chaste & grave matrones” to stop their ears at the story.

By infiltrating a lover into the household, and allowing him to usurp the place of the husband, wives like Alice Arden and Mrs Beast violate the domestic ideal, as exemplified in marriage manuals and conduct books of the period. The notion of domesticity, a concept which, with its connotations of the home and the local as opposed to the outside world, the foreign and the strange, was then gaining currency,<sup>11</sup> is central to these stories in various ways. A woman is criminalised as much by conduct inappropriate to her in her role as

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<sup>11</sup>See the discussion by Diana E. Henderson (1997).

wife as by actual deeds of violence. In the ballad *Anne Wallens Lamentation for the Murthering of her Husband* (1616) Anne Wallen, who narrates her own story, blames herself for shrewish behaviour:

My husband having beene about the towne,  
And coming home, he on his bed lay down:  
To rest himselfe, which when I did espie,  
I fell to railing most outragiously.

I cald him Rogue, and slaue, and al to naught,  
Repeating the worst language might be thought  
Thou drunken knave I said, and arrant sot,  
Thy minde is set on nothing but the pot.<sup>12</sup>

The reciprocal violence of the husband, who apparently brawled with and beat her, is played down. Men were, after all, permitted to chastise their wives if they considered it appropriate. That the wife bore responsibility for the regulation of domestic economy emerges strongly in a pamphlet which actually deals with wife-murder, *Two Horrible and Inhumaine Murders done in Lincolnshire, by two Husbands upon their wives* (1604). The author in fact implies that one of the wives was to blame for her fate because although she was mild and gentle in public, she was “sharpe, bitter, and biting at home” (sig. B2v). He uses the murder as an exemplary lesson in domestic conduct, directed—and this is significant—at wives. Husbands are urged to take care

that they give not any cause of offence to their honest wives: for if the hatred of a woman be once rooted in her heart, tis no way to be dissolved, but by death. And for Wives, they shall doe as well, if in modest and milde manner, they observe the humours of their husbands (to whom they are tied by God...) not reproving them boldly so bitterly when they are very merrie, very melancholy, or before company, lest they drive them to unmanly cruelty, which will (in time) proove hateful tyrannie. (sig. C2)

In such accounts the household becomes a volatile environment. It is not surprising that the weapons to which murderous wives resort are commonly those which are closest to hand in the house. Anne Wallen, whose husband was a joiner, picks up his chisel; Katherine Francis, in the ballad *A Warning for Wives* (1629), stabs her husband in the neck with a pair of scissors (Rollins 1922: 299-304), which is also the weapon used by Sarah Elston in *A Warning for Bad Wives* (1678). Wives who planned their crimes in advance often laced their husband’s food with poison, killing in the guise of nurturing. Anne Brewen, in Kyd’s account, makes her husband “a measse of suger soppes (for it was the weeks before shrovetide),” into which she has put poison secured by her lover; Elizabeth Caldwell puts ratsbane into oat-cakes. In Henry Goodcole’s

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<sup>12</sup>In Hyder E. Rollins (1922: 84-88).

*The Adultresses Funerall Day* (1635) Alice Clarke's lover urges her to use her husband's favourite delicacy as the disguise for the poison, "to pop him up with white bread and milke, and to put something else into it, to choak or stuffe up his throat" (sig. C1v – C2).

The accomplice is a ubiquitous and essential figure in these narratives. Almost every wife is helped or encouraged by another person, whose role in the actual killing is often the greater. Commonly this is a lover, as in the cases of Alice Arden and Mrs Beast, of lower class or status to the husband, which heightens the treasonous aspect of the crime. In the case of Anne Hamton, the central figure in a short but vivid pamphlet called *Murther, Murther* (1641), the accomplice is another woman, but the author, by presenting the women's relationship as a sexually unnatural female pact against a man who is an exemplary husband, actually enhances the treasonous implications. Anne Hamton, described as "a light housewife" (2) lives with her husband in the house of her friend Margaret Harwood. She complains untruthfully to Margaret Harwood about her husband, saying he "was an enemy to good fellowship, and continually wrangled and brawled at her, because she affected it" (4). The devil makes an intervention in the situation, tempting not the wife herself, but Margaret Harwood, "with bloody cogitations, for she hearing her Ningles unjust complaint, she cried out that it was her own fault, for letting such an abject villain to live" (4).<sup>13</sup> At first Anne refuses to listen, but the devil goes to work on her also, and she administers to her husband five drams of poison "enough to have destroyed ten men." Then she runs to Margaret Harwood who after ascertaining the dosage approves the act: "Well done, said she, if five will not be enough, ten shall, and thereupon they went up to see him, but he was then burst" (5).

In such accounts the prominence of the accomplice's role often diminishes the extent of the wife's agency, though not of course her responsibility in law. But in many other accounts the wife is technically only an accessory to the crime, which is carried out by a man; but she more than shares his guilt, even though her part in the actual killing may have been negligible and is also condemned to death. In the notorious "Page of Plymouth" murder of 1591, George Page is actually killed, with great brutality, by two hired assassins, who "laide him overthwart the bed, and against the bedside broke his neck," having first beaten and strangled him. Mrs Page is alone in another room at the time. But at her trial she readily accepts responsibility, saying that "she had rather dye with Strangwidge [her lover] then to live with Padge," and the couple are

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<sup>13</sup>"Ningle" or "ingle" is an unexpected word here, more commonly used to refer to a male homosexual lover. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a boy favourite (in a bad sense), a catamite."

executed along with the two assassins (Anonymous 1591: sigs. B3, B4). The issue of agency may be handled with considerable complexity. In the play *A Warning to Fair Women* (1599), as in *Murther, Murther*, the wife has a female accomplice; but in this instance the husband's murder is actually carried out by the woman's lover, and there is less evidence of the wife's complicity in it. The play dramatises events of some twenty years earlier which were, like those of *Arden of Faversham* and *Page of Plymouth* cited in numerous chronicles and pamphlets; in the play's depiction, Anne Sanders, the wife, is shown being drawn into a conspiracy to murder her husband almost against her will. She is desired by Captain Brown, a soldier, who bribes her confidante, Anne Drury, into seducing Anne Sanders on his behalf. Anne Drury, known to possess "such a sweet tongue as will supple a stone," regards Anne Sanders as malleable: "She is young and fair / And may be tempered easily like wax." Anne has in fact spurned Browne's advances, and he himself regretfully describes her as steadfastly chaste: "So demure, so modest are her looks... as do repulse love's false artillery" (23-5).

Anne Drury gets her opportunity through an occasion in which she, characterised as a knowing widow, is able to exploit the wife's contradictory position within marriage, as servant but also fellow. Sanders is a merchant, and experiences temporary cash-flow problems; simultaneously Anne has placed orders for goods with a draper and a milliner, and needs £30 in cash, which she has asked her husband's man to bring her. But Sanders has for the moment commandeered all the household cash, and, in front of the tradesmen the manservant refuses to give Anne the money she needs. She is angry and humiliated:

I am a woman, and in that respect  
Am well content my husband shall control me:  
But that my man should overawe me too,  
And in the sight of strangers, Mistress Drury,  
I tell you true, does grieve me to the heart. (IV.91-5)

Drury not only takes the opportunity to fan the flames of marital discontent ("Your husband was too blame, to say the troth, / That gave his servant such authority") but also plays on Anne's gullibility, suggesting that in her foresight it has been revealed to her that Anne will marry a second husband. This, of course, is to be Captain Brown. Even so, Anne is not excited at the prospect ("I do not find me any way inclined / To change of new affection." IV.193), and her agency is at every point downplayed. There is no subject-position for her as murderous wife, and her involvement in the murder plot, evolved between Drury, her servant Roger, and Browne, is not depicted in the play's action, but only indicated only in symbolic dumb show. Tragedy rubs the hands of Browne, Drury, and Roger with blood, though Anne is shown to dip only one finger: but after a personified Lust has invited Browne to cut down a great tree,

representing the husband Sanders, Browne and Anne embrace, and Chastity appears “with her hair dishevelled” in distress. At the end of the play Anne, with Drury, Roger and Browne, is tried; at the trial the white rose she wears in her bosom turns red. On the scaffold she confesses to provoking God’s anger by her sins, “Not only by consenting to the death / Of my late husband, but by wicked lust.”

The play intersperses scenes of symbolic dumb show with scenes of narrative throughout. The gap between the narrative, or representational level, whereby Anne Sanders is tricked and manoeuvred into an act which she has not willed, and the symbolic level, on which she becomes unambiguously guilty of lust and, by extension, of murder, seems to represent the problematic issue of female agency. The contrition Anne is shown to feel at the end of the play, depicted in a scene where she says farewell to her children before her execution and gives them each a “book of holy meditations,” appears to be an attempt to recuperate for her an appropriate female role, that of good mother. In the account of Elizabeth Caldwell’s attempt to poison her husband in *A True Discourse of the Practises of Elizabeth Caldwell* (1604) by Gilbert Dugdale there is a very similar scenario: Caldwell is wooed by a neighbour, Jeffery Bownd, in her husband’s absence; she resists, and is only persuaded to take him as a lover when Isabel Hall, a widow, pleads his case. It is Jeffery Bownd who buys ratsbane, and Isabel Hall who sees that it is incorporated into oatcakes baked for Elizabeth Caldwell’s husband. The husband actually survives the murder attempt, but since a child is accidentally killed by the poisoned cakes, Caldwell, along with Bownd and Hall, is executed. The pamphlet describes in detail how in prison Caldwell, a well-born woman, becomes a model of penitence, reading the Bible every day, and counselling other prisoners, such that “there was many of all sorts resorted to see her, as no fewer some daies then three hundred persons” (sig. B2), and a strong movement, supported by Caldwell’s aristocratic patron, Lady Cholmsley, grows to have her pardoned (Dugdale 1604). Many of these accounts lay a strong stress on the penitence of the condemned woman, and the part played by the consolations of religion in her last days. So great was the penitence of Sarah Elston during her last fortnight in prison when she prepares herself for the scaffold on account of the murder of her husband, that the author of the pamphlet considers the committing of the crime almost worthwhile: “Had not one foot slipt into the mouth of Hell, she had never been in this forwardness for Heaven” (Anonymous 1678: 4).

The part played by gender-expectations in these accounts of husband murder is related to the handling of agency. The connection may be highlighted through a contrast between two accounts of criminal women, the story of Alice Clarke, told by Henry Goodcole, Chaplain of Newgate prison, in *The*

*Adultrresses Funerall Day* (1635), and the anonymous account of *The Arraignment and burning of Margaret Ferneseed* (1608). Alice Clarke killed her husband with a pennyworth of mercury, the money supplied for the purpose by her lover, Henry White. When questioned by Goodcole she initially she denies her responsibility, on the grounds that her husband himself removed the poison from her pocket which he “had rifled, upon hope to finde some drinke or money there” (B3). At this point in the narrative Goodcole refers to her as “this obdurate Malefactor... who in Adultery was so rooted, and insensible of the heavy Burthen” (B4v). Subsequently she confesses not only to the poisoning, but to having had previous lovers who had encouraged her to kill her husband. But here the narrative seems to change direction, and Alice is transformed from the villain to the victim of her own life. We now learn that she was a servant who became pregnant by her master; and that he married her off to the much older Fortune Clarke, who abused her and regularly mistreated her. He used “not only to beate her with the next cudgell that came accidentally to his hand, but after tying her to his bed-post, to strippe her and whippe her, etc”(B1v). Thus Goodcole creates two conflicting views of Alice: as battered wife, “almost compelld... to what she did” and as murderous strumpet. He is enabled to opt for the first when Alice makes not only a full and voluntary confession in prison but also a good death : “with hearty prayer, and sweet tone of voice [she] surrendered her soule into the hands of the Lord Jesu” (sig. C2). He sees her now as a “poor wretched creature;” the considerable involvement of other men in the murder makes her less, not more, of an agent, and her behaviour in prison and full confession at the scaffold transforms her from unruly woman into penitent sinner.

Margaret Ferneseede, on the other hand, never admits to the murder of her husband Anthony whose corpse is found with its throat cut some distance from her home. She may well not have done it, but this account is from the start that of a guilty woman who is also a liar. Margaret is described as a “woman that... was given to all the looseness and lewdnesse of life, which either unlawfull lust, or abhominable prostitution could violently cast upon her” (A3). She is an independent woman who works as a brothel-keeper, and is believed by neighbours to have taken a young lover. When informed of her husband’s death she does not behave like a grieving widow: “neither did the grudging of an afflicted countenance gal her remembrance, but as if it had been the report of some ordinarie or vulgar newes she imbraced it with an irespective neglect and carelesnes” (sig. A4). She does not weep at the sight of the corpse, she answers the magistrate’s questions carefully, and denies the murder “with such a shameles constancie, that she strooke amazement into all that heard her” (B1). There is no direct evidence to connect her with the murder, which has been committed with physical violence rather than the woman’s more usual weapon, poison, but she is imprisoned and tried for it. In prison she continues to behave

badly, being “rather a provoker than an appeaser of dissensions, given to much swearing, scarce praying but continually scolding” (B1). She is convicted on circumstantial evidence, and although she confesses to other crimes such as living off immoral earnings and receiving stolen goods, she goes to her death at the stake “still obstinately” denying the murder. It is clear in this case that Margaret Ferneseede’s refusal to adopt an acceptable model of female conduct is what condemns her; she is openly licentious and also impenitent. In a culture where the ideology of the “good woman” was so powerful in all aspects of society, it was easy to conflate such deviant and threatening behaviour with husband-murder.

What, then, of the mother who kills her child, an act imaged not only as monstrous and unnatural but also as peculiarly female? “It is too manifestly known, what a number of Stepmothers and Strumpets have most inhumanly murdered their children,” wrote John Taylor in *The Unnaturall Father* (1621); “But in the memory of man (nor scarcely in any History) it is not to be found, that a Father did ever take two Innocent Children Out of their beds... to drown them”(17). The infanticide statute of 1624 underpins this gendered view of the crime, definitively associating it with “women, bastardy, and poverty” (Dolan 1994: 129) and the very fact that such a piece of legislation found its way onto the statutes demonstrates the anxiety generated by evidence of disorderly female sexuality as well as by the crime itself. But popular accounts of child-murder do not usually address this anxiety in a direct way, as I hope to show; and as Frances Dolan notes, they “differ markedly from accounts of other kinds of domestic crime, especially regarding the subjectivities they create for the murderers and how they depict the relationship between perpetrator and victim” (Dolan 1994: 139).

According to legislation, the typical child-killing was the murder of a newborn baby by an unwed mother. In a ballad by Martin Parker with the heading “No natural mother, but a Monster. Or, the exact relation of one, who for making away her owne new borne childe about Brainford neere London, was hang’d at Teyborne, on Wed the 11 of December, 1633,” an unnamed servant bears an illegitimate child, smothers it, then guiltily reveals the corpse to her mistress and is condemned to hang. Written in the familiar mode of warning, or “goodnight,” the ballad takes the form of the woman’s lament before execution:

My carriage was too wild, / Woe is me, woe is me  
 And I was got with child / Take heed fair Maidens,  
 The father on’t was fled, / And all my hopes were dead,  
 This troubled soe my head, / Woe worth the folly.

How I my fault might hide, / Still I mus’d, still I mus’d  
 That I might not be spide, / Nor yet suspected,



To this bad thought of mine, / The Deuill did incline  
To any ill designe, / He leads assistance.

The first person mode implies agency, the woman's voice; but the oral delivery, by a professional singer, in all probability a man, to the well-known tune "Welladay," might subvert this, presenting the woman, in Brechtian manner, rather than impersonating her. As often, the crime and also its discovery are imputed to divine not human agency, as the work of the devil and God who substitute in this period for an explanation of the criminal act derived from psychopathology. After the woman has smothered her baby, she is smitten by conscience, which is rendered as the prompting of God "that sits on high / With his all-seeing eye," and she confesses her "barbarous wickednesse." But even in ballads, this sort of infanticide narrative is uncommon. Popular representation prefers the sensational, the abnormal, to the typical. It functions not as a record, but as a construct or a deterrent fable (Gaskill 2000: 213), exploring and interrogating the ideology of motherhood through fictions of its imperfect operations. It emphasises the horror of the crime, defining it as the perversion of domesticity and natural impulse. More typical is the case of *The Cruel Midwife* (1693), one of many accounts in pamphlets and ballads of the crimes of Mary Compton, which opens by rhetorically constructing the infanticidal mother as a monster outside the realms of nature and civilization:

Every thing is carried on by a natural Instinct, to the Preservation of it self in its own Being: And by the same Law of Nature even the most brutish amongst the Bruits them selves, may be observed to retain a special kind of Indulgence and Tenderness towards the young.

The barbarity of the infanticidal women "must be imputable to their savage nature, and the bloodiness of their disposition."<sup>14</sup> In popular presentations these women are usually wives or widows whose instincts for the nurturing of their children and the preservation of their households have been perverted. The outrage created by such deviance has to be differently addressed from the scandal of husband-murder; the relation between perpetrator and victim is differently balanced and the issue of rebellion against patriarchal authority does not arise. Diabolic agency is frequently invoked to explain how a woman, especially a mother could behave in so troubling a fashion. Thus the devil urges Mary Cook, a wife and mother of a large family and "of very civil sober life and conversation" to make away with her youngest child and then to kill herself; in another account, *Murther will Out* (1675), a Stepney widow is troubled by a sleepless child:

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<sup>14</sup>*The Cruel Midwife* 1693, in H.E. Rollins (1922: 1, 7).

Its continual crying a nights made its mothers life very uncomfortable, but this poor woman bore up under it as well as could be expected for a weak Vessel (2).

Well, that is, until the devil tempts her to get rid of it. The titlepage of *A Pitiless Mother. That most unnaturally at one time murdered two of her owne children at Acton within sixe miles from London uppon holy Thursday last 1616* depicts a menacing devil with wings, scaly body, and animal feet offering cords to a woman who is strangling two children on an elaborate bed. In this instance the significance of the diabolic prompting is enlarged by a further factor: the mother, Margaret Vincent, a well-born woman “graced with good parts,” happily married for at least twelve years, is suddenly “converted to a blinde believe of bewitching heresie” and persuaded that “it was meritorious, yea, and pardonable, to take away the lives of any opposing Protestants.” She decides to kill her three children because “they were brought up in blindness and darksome errors,” and claims, after two are dead, that “they are Saints in heaven, and I nothing at all repent it” (A4v). From her perspective, the violent act is one of altruism; from the normalising view of the writer, it is one of self-destruction:

[She] by nature should have cherished them with her owne body, as the Pellican that pecks her owne brest to feed her young ones with her blood (sig. A3v).

But instead she sheds “the blood of her owne body” (sig. B), “her owne deare blood bred in her owne body, cherisht in her own wombe with much dearness full forty weekes” (sig. A4). The unacknowledged contradictions in this account implicitly testify to the complexity of the motivations behind child-murder, and to the overlapping of discourses. Here, as elsewhere, can be traced an underlying humanitarian narrative in which the mother acts from desperation, born of a wish, however misguided, to save her child from something worse by killing it. In *Blood for Blood* the suicidal Mary Cook fears for her child’s life should she herself die. She decides

she had better rid that of life first, and then all her fears and cares for it would be at and end, and so she should put an end to her own miserable life, which was so burdensome to her. (15)

In another infanticide ballad, “The Unnatural Mother,” (1690) written in the mode of a moral lesson directed at wives who lack patience, Jane Lawson kills herself and her two children after an assault from her drunken husband:

And then he did her give / A box upon the ear,  
 Long after that she did not live, / Nor her poore children dear:  
 Two of them then she caught, As severall neighbours tell;  
 These babes destruction then she wrought / with her own, in a well.

In the pamphlet *The distressed mother: OR, Sorrowful Wife in Tears* (?1699), Katherine Fox is married to a wastrel husband who spends all the household money on drink and leaves her and two young children without food. Confronted by the cries of her starving children, she is full of despair; the writer renders her plight in direct speech:

Where shall I get it? Your father hath lost his Patience, with his Wealth, and we our Hopes, with his Mishaps: Alas! Alas! What shall become of me, or who shall succour you, my Children? Better it is to Die with one Stroke, then to languish in a continual Famine. So pressed by these Miseries, and brought to Despair, she took a knife in her Hand, and cut her Childrens Throats from ear to ear, setting herself down purposely to Die, and perish in her Sorrows.

In such contexts the distinction between murder and mothering, destruction and protection, becomes uneasily blurred (Dolan 1994: 148). But rather than articulate and explore this confusion, most writers wish to recuperate the infanticidal woman for femininity and so fall back on the same strategy as in the accounts of husband-murder, stressing the woman's penitence, and if possible the exemplary nature of her death. The account of Mary Cook typifies this approach; in prison she makes elaborate spiritual preparations for death, and a huge crowd gathers to watch her die. She ascends the scaffold in the sight of "thousands of spectators beholding her with a general compassion," and as she is hanged, she lifts up her hands to God "in a most fervent manner while sense remained, which was about half a quarter of an hour" (48). The description of the crime of another infanticidal mother, Mary Goodenough, in *Fair Warning to Murderers of Infants* (1691), concludes with a ten page letter in the form of a Puritan sermon, supposedly written (or dictated) by Mary on the night before her execution, and addressed to her surviving children, reminding them that "without Christ you can do nothing... all your sufficiency is of God" (6-7). This late pamphlet is exceptional in its clear attempt to write Mary Goodenough's act not in the discourse of monstrosity but that of social failure. In the prefatory letter to the reader the author addresses himself not just to the "murderers of infants" but also to "negligent parents," to "Adulterers and Adultresses," and to the unknown father of Mary's baby:

As to that man who had the first and principal hand in this Womans and her Infants Tragedy, I would desire some neighbours... to ask him some Questions such as these. Whether he did not act the Devils part, when he tempted this woman, as Sathan did our Saviour.

The responsibility of the community is, unusually, also acknowledged:

Who knows how far your Uncharitableness hiding yourselves from your own Flesh, from this poor Womans Wants, contributed to the strength of that temptation which brought her to that Sin and Punishment which have left these Children Motherless. It was for want of Bread she said: If her Modesty

did make her asham'd to beg, did not her meagre Look, her starved Children,  
her meanly furnish'd House and Table beg from you?

As I have suggested, the connection between domestic crime and social failure is not commonly made in this literature. More typically, representations of both husband-murder and infanticide are typically fashioned so as to make a case for a providentialist vision of human life. Crimes and their perpetrators are revealed in surprising and quasi-miraculous circumstances. Corpses gush blood in the presence of the murderer. Hidden murders are revealed when wells are drained or orchards dug. The cries of a dog trapped in a privy lead rescuers to the body of an infant, thus demonstrating that “God, either by beasts of the field, foules of the ayre, fishes in the seas, wormes in the ground, or things bearing neither sence nor life will by one meanes or other make deedes of darknes cleare as day” (*Deeds Against Nature, and Monsters by Kinde*, 1614, sig. A4v). In the two accounts of the Annis Dell murder case, a tongueless child regains the power of speech four years after she has been mutilated and her baby brother murdered, and identifies the murderer. “If we look,” says one of the authors, “into [the case] with the eyes of natural reason and human sense it will be thought incredible and impossible. But with God nothing is impossible.”<sup>15</sup> The prison confessions and repentances of murderers serve a similar reinforcing function; through the public exhibition of penitence, particularly by a woman, the circle created by the transgression of social order, the inversion or subversion of gender-roles, and reaffirmation of social and gender order was closed off (Lake 1994: 270). The stories of women’s criminality tend to support the general view expressed earlier, that the pattern of concerns about the causes of social disorder was changing: the proportion of husband-murders in relation to that of wife-murders in news accounts does decrease, and infanticide narratives are increasingly constructed to interpret the act in socially comprehensible terms. Within these representations notions of female agency remain problematic; yet a space is beginning to open for the expression of a female subjectivity, albeit that of the woman attempting to construct the man as other, against whom she defines herself. I end with a striking quotation from the official examination in 1688 of Mary Hobry (Anonymous 1688), convicted for the murder of her husband who came home in a drunken rage. After he had

acted with such Violence upon her Body in despite of all the Opposition that she could make, as forced from her a great deal of Blood... [she lay] in Torments both of Body and of Mind, thinking with herself, What will become of me? What am I to do? here am I, threatned to be Murder'd, and I have no Way in the World to Deliver myself, but by beginning with him. (Anonymous 1688: 33-34)

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<sup>15</sup>Cited in Peter Lake (1994: 271).

By showing Hobry in the act of choosing to kill, a violent response to violence committed, this author challengingly offers his readers, particularly women, a female subject-position with which to identify. But it was still the case that Hobry, who, if her testimony is to be believed, suffered the greatest mental and physical cruelty from her husband for many years, was found guilty of petty treason and burnt at the stake.

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