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“BLOODY TYGRISSES”: MURDEROUS WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN  
ENGLISH DRAMA AND POPULAR LITERATURE

by

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B.S. Wellesley College, 1987

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies  
in the College of Graduate Studies  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines artistic and literary images of murderous women in popular print published in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. The construction of murderous women in criminal narratives, published between 1558 and 1625 in pamphlet, ballad, and play form, is examined in the context of contemporary historical records and cultural discourse. Chapter One features a literature review of the topic in recent scholarship. Chapter Two, comprised of two subsections, discusses representations of early modern women in contemporary literature and criminal archives. The subsections in Chapter Two examine early modern treatises, sermons, and essays concerning the nature of women, the roles and responsibilities of wives and mothers, and debates about marriage, as well as a review of women tried for murder in the Middlesex assize courts between 1558 and 1625. Chapter Three, comprised of four subsections, engages in critical readings of approximately 52 pamphlets, ballads, and plays published in the same period. Individual subsections discuss how traitorous wives, murderous mothers, women who murder in their communities, and punishment and redemption are represented in the narratives. Woodcut illustrations printed in these texts are also examined, and their iconographic contribution to the construction of bad women is discussed. Women who murder in these texts are represented as consummately evil creatures capable of inflicting terrible harm to their families and communities, and are consistently discovered, captured, and executed by their communities for their heinous crimes. Murderous women in early modern popular literature also provided a means for contemporary men and women to explore, confront, and share in the depths of sin, while anticipating their own spiritual salvation. Pamphlets, plays, and broadsides related

bawdy, graphic, and violent stories that allow modern readers a glimpse of the popular culture and mental world of Renaissance England.

This thesis is dedicated to Max, Zachary, Charles, and Sophie who show me daily the joys of living in the present, and to my husband Tom who supported me from the first graduate class to the last footnote.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am indebted to the invaluable guidance of my thesis committee: Dr. Katheryn Giglio, Dr. Peter L. Larson, and Dr. Kathleen Oliver for their gracious support, helpful critiques, and considerable patience. I would also like to thank my colleagues Kathy Parry and Laurie Uttich for their friendship and insight, and my mother, Dr. Rue Ziegler, for long-distance cheerleading, and late-night research tutorials.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In a passage from Ovid, translated into English in 1567, Procne pounces on her son in a murderous rage:

She dragged Itys after hir, as when it happens in Inde  
A Tyger gets a little Calfe that suckes upon a Hynde  
And drags him through the shadie woods. And when that they had found  
A place within the house far off and far above the gound,  
The Progne strake him with a sword now plainly seeing whother  
He should, and holding up his handes, and crying mother, mother.<sup>1</sup>

Afterward, she cuts his body into small pieces, and serves it to her husband cooked for dinner. Although his “pretie armes about the necke had hugde hir fast, and flattering wordes with childish toyes in kissing forth had cast,” Procne brutally stabs Itys while he clings to her breast.<sup>2</sup> Procne is not alone in her murderous ruthlessness. In Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, Tamar orders her sons to murder Bassanius, and to rape and dismember his young wife Lavinia. Turning on the mother and sons who have captured her, Lavinia

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Golding, tr, The XV Bookes of P. Ovidus Naso entitled Metamorphosis (London, 1567), XI. 805-810.

<sup>2</sup> Golding, 811-812.

demands, “When did the tiger’s young ones teach the dam? O, do not learn her wrath; she taught it thee!”<sup>3</sup> On stage, and in the pages of pamphlets and ballads published throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, dozens of women, like the tigerous Tamora and Procne, wrought havoc and ruin on their families as they poisoned husbands, strangled children, and stabbed neighbors. Woodcut illustrations on the title pages of these texts depicted women committing graphic and violent murders, or suffering gruesome executions. Stories and pictures of murderous women, as well as the true crimes they were based on, were shocking to early modern English society, and featured traitorous wives, bloodthirsty queens, greedy mistresses, and spiteful witches who cheat, steal, and kill, threatening the peace in their households and communities. These sensational narratives of women violating social and familial roles, and disrupting the order of their homes and neighborhoods, were especially provocative to early modern readers and audiences not simply because their protagonists resisted contemporary feminine ideals of chastity, obedience, and silence, but because they featured women who were wholly, outrageously, and unnaturally wicked. Readers and audiences found in the awful crimes committed by women in these texts an evil that was at once instructive and titillating. Women’s murder stories are tales of temptation, sin, punishment, and redemption, and were the means by which early modern audiences could confront and debate a woman’s propensity for sin. Women who murder in early

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, (London, 1594), David Bevington, ed. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 2.3.142-143. All subsequent citations from Shakespeare’s plays are from this edition.

modern print and drama do not just subvert notions of good women; they exemplify absolute notions of supremely bad women.

These murder narratives circulated throughout early modern English society in the form of printed broadsides (or broadsheets), printed and sung ballads, published pamphlets, and publicly performed plays. Printed on one side of a single sheet of paper, broadsides in particular were cheaper than other forms of printed material and thus accessible to a wide spectrum of readers.<sup>4</sup> Many of the narratives of murderous women were written in ballad form and printed as songs to popular tunes that could be easily memorized and disseminated orally. Evidence suggests that ballads and broadsides were tacked to the walls of alehouses and taverns and shared by literate and illiterate patrons alike.<sup>5</sup> Pamphlets, numbering between two and ninety-six pages, generally sold for one or two pennies.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, plays performed in the public playhouses could be enjoyed for as little as a penny. Thus, consumers of this literature comprised a cross-section of contemporary Elizabethan and Jacobean society, from gentleman to serving-woman. Literate readers and illiterate audiences purchased pamphlets, attended plays, and sang ballads. Furthermore, while often crude, the woodcut prints on pamphlets and broadsides suggest an interchangeable and iconic quality to the images and literary characters they represent, further communicating subject,

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Spufford Small Books and Pleasant Histories (Athens GA: U of Georgia P, 1981) 11-15.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Smith, The Acoustic World of Modern England (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) 26; Adam Fox, Oral and Literate Culture in England: 1500-1700 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) 300-301; Spufford 11-23.

<sup>6</sup> Joad Raymond, Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2003) 5; Spufford 262-3.

plot, and themes, in popular print narratives. Pamphlets, plays, and broadsides relate bawdy, graphic, and violent stories and allow modern readers a glimpse of the popular culture of Renaissance England.

Authored by both men and women, early modern crime stories proliferated within the context of a rapidly developing industry of popular literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, the illustrations accompanying them further reflect multi-faceted contemporary conceptions of dangerous women and the kinds of threats they posed to society, as well as the varying levels of literacy amongst early modern audiences. Additionally, representations of women's crime in popular print participate within a larger and often vociferous discourse about the nature of women, and their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, in society. Writers as diverse as the Puritan moralist Phillip Stubbes, the satiric 'water poet' John Taylor, proto-feminist Rachel Speght, and playwright William Shakespeare, condemned, satirized, and dramatized women, from queens to fortune tellers, committing acts of lust, depravity, and desperation. Finally, murder stories of all genres were popularly consumed during a period when courts began to criminalize and increasingly prosecute the very kinds of activities detailed in these texts. Early modern English society, in the production and consumption of popular literature and plays, began to redefine and articulate the nature of woman through the construction of characters who negotiated and contested the boundaries that distinguished good women from bad. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century pamphlets, plays, and broadsides of murderous women thus present characters contending with economic, religious, and social changes that both thematically link the narratives and speak to the concerns of the men and women who consumed them.

The women, on whom these stories are based, respond to the circumstances in their lives with violence and cruelty. The texts represent women's crimes as quintessential definitions of consummate evil.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Secondary Source Materials

From their debut in the sixteenth century, pamphlets and ballads fascinated readers and listeners. Early modern popular literature did not disappear to be rediscovered in dusty archives; these works have been collected, debated, and reprinted several times over in articles, books, and anthologies. Samuel Pepys, the noted seventeenth-century diarist, collected dozens of printed pamphlets and ballads, including some noted women's murder stories, which were reprinted by Hyder Edward Rollins in Old English Ballads in 1920. However, despite their popularity, pamphlets and broadsides were often derided in the seventeenth century as the lowest form of literature. The author William Cornwallis wrote of his own feelings for popular print in 1600:

All kinde of bookes are profitable, except printed Bawdery; they abuse youth: but Pamphlets, and lying Stories, and News, and two penny Poets I would knowe them, but beware of beeing familiar with them: my custome is to read these, and presently to make use of them, for they lie in my privy, and when I come thither, and have occasion to imploy it, I read them, halfe a side at once is my ordinary, which when I have read, I use in that kind, that waste



paper is most subject too, but to a cleanlier profit.<sup>7</sup>

The pamphleteer Thomas Nashe noted that he, in the person of his protagonist, “hath bequeathed for wast paper here among you certaine pages...If there bee some better than other, he craves you would honor them in theyr death so much as to drie and kindle Tobacco with them...rather turn them to stop mustard-pottes, than the Grocers should have one patch of them to wrap mace in.”<sup>8</sup> Pamphlets and ballads existed in a world of mustard pots and privies, accessible, easily consumed, and quickly recycled.

While scorned even by their publishers, broadsides and pamphlets nonetheless enjoyed widespread popularity. Philip Barrough complained in 1590, “We see it dayly; that ridiculous toyes and absurd pamphlets being put forth without anie color, be neverthesse plausiblie and pleasinglie accepted.”<sup>9</sup> As illicit pleasure, a means of economic gain, or a corrupting influence on English society, popular literature was both controversial and wildly popular with consumers and authors alike. Bruce Smith estimates that as many as 4,000 ballads were published by 1600, and Tessa Watt asserts “an absolute minimum of 600,000 ballads were circulating in the second half of the sixteenth century.”<sup>10</sup> In popular literature, Elizabethan men and women found an arena in which to examine and contest contemporary

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<sup>7</sup> Sir William Cornwallis, Essayes, ed. D.C. Allen (Baltimore: U of Maryland P, 1946) 50.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Nashe, The Unfortunate Traveller, or Life of Jack Wilson (London, 1594). Unless otherwise cited, all sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources included in this thesis were accessed through the Early English Books Online <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.lib.ucf.edu/home>>.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Barrough, The Method of Phisicke (London, 1590) Preface (8).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Smith, The Acoustic World 168; Tessa Watt, Cheap Print and Popular Piety (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 11.

views on love and sex, good and evil, and perhaps to seek answers to the troubling uncertainties of early modern life. Profane or not, pamphlets, ballads, and plays spoke to the most personal and profound issues confronting Renaissance England.

The earliest collections and analyses of early modern popular print were published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These anthologies and scholarly critiques focus primarily on ballads, rather than on pamphlets or broadsides, and they feature heroic or romantic stories, rather than criminal narratives. The most well-known of the anthologies are John Ashton's A Century of Ballads illustrative of the Life, Manners and Habits of the English Nations during the Seventeenth Century; John Payne Collier's Illustrations of Early English Popular Literature; William Chappell's nine-volume The Roxburghe Ballads; and Francis James Child's The English and Scottish Popular Ballads. Historians continue to cite Chappell, Child, Rollins, and Collier's books as the most comprehensive collections of ballads.<sup>11</sup>

While many of these efforts attempt to explore popular early modern culture, they largely ignore the numerous pamphlets and broadsides that featured news and crime. Moreover, none of these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collections examine the social, literary, or historical contexts of early English print. Stories of crime, and specifically

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<sup>11</sup> John Ashton, A Century of Ballads Illustrative of the Life, Manners and Habits of The English Nations during the Seventeenth Century (London, 1887); William Chappell and J. Woodfall Ebsworth, eds., The Roxburgh Ballads 9 vols (London: 1871-1899); Francis James Child, ed., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (New York:Cooper Square Publishers, 1884); John Payne Collier, Illustrations of Early English Popular Literature vol. 1 & 2 (New York: Bloom, 1863).

women and crime, present in late twentieth-century examinations, are largely absent in earlier ballad collections. For the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, English ballads were romantic relics of bygone times rather than evidence of cultural or social history.

Louis Wright's seminal Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England, published in 1935, is one of the earliest efforts to examine English social history. Although his work focuses primarily on the history of tradesmen and merchants, it nevertheless calls for a wider definition of what was acceptable for study in the field. Wright's work represents a distinctive shift in historical inquiry. While many historians continued to examine history from above, the scope of what was now deemed relevant for study widened. Wright's work opened the door for future historians to examine aspects of English society, including women and crime, using a variety of sources.

Joseph Marshburn was the first author to look exclusively at crime pamphlets and ballads in two works, Murder & Witchcraft in England, 1550-1640, published in 1971, and Blood and Knavery: A Collection of English Renaissance Pamphlets and Ballads of Crime and Sin, published in 1973.<sup>12</sup> Organized chronologically by dates of publication, Marshburn, in Blood and Knavery, was interested in what popular literature about crime could reveal about life and society. Marshburn argues,

in order to understand an age, it is important to know more than the titans; it is

necessary also to know something of the common men of the time and the tenor of

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Marshburn, Murder and Witchcraft in England, 1550-1640 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Joseph Marshburn, and Alan Velie, eds., Blood and Knavery: A Collection of English Renaissance Pamphlets and Ballads of Crime and Sin (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973).

the daily life of the period... We attempt to cast some light on the Elizabethan man in the street by showing what he wrote and what he read – the popular literature of the time, which consisted primarily of pamphlets and ballads.<sup>13</sup>

While Marshburn included a preface and introduction, the rest of the book is a collection of reprinted crime ballads and pamphlets. Out of the eleven narratives reproduced, seven feature female murderers, prostitutes, or witches. Although Marshburn does not draw distinctions between male and female criminals, his book is the earliest examination of representations of women and crime in early modern English street literature.

More recently, scholars have continued to examine popular literature and social history as a way of studying “history from below” in an attempt to acknowledge the contributions of a previously ignored segment of English history. These approaches have included the theoretical scholarship of Marxism, feminism, interdisciplinary studies, statistical surveys, New Historicism, and micro-history among others. Most early inquiries into popular literature, however, included analyses of the publishing trade and estimates of literacy and public consumption. Works such as Margaret Spufford’s Small Books and Pleasant Histories and Tessa Watt’s Cheap Print and Popular Piety examine aspects of popular literature with only tangential references to women and crime in pamphlets and ballads. Other examinations of crime and popular literature emphasize literary analysis as a way of attempting to recover the social world of early modern England. None, however, focused exclusively on women.

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<sup>13</sup> Marshburn and Velie, Blood and Knavery 10.

Peter Lake's article, "Deeds against Nature: Cheap Print, Protestantism and Murder in Early Seventeenth-Century England," places murder pamphlets, including several that feature female perpetrators, in a socio-theological context. Lake argues that pamphlets and ballads promoted Puritan values. He is primarily interested in what crime pamphlets and ballads reveal about the relationship between the Godly elites and commoners. To this end most of the pamphlets and ballads he cites in detail feature female criminals: Canberry Bess, Margaret Ferne-seede, Elizabeth Caldwell, and Margaret Sanders. Lake posits that while crime pamphlets in general portrayed society in peril, female criminals in particular exemplified a world of uncontrolled degradation and sin: "It may not be going too far to see in all this a certain tendency to project onto women the negative, sinful, fleshly aspects of human nature: a tendency if anything confirmed by the elements of sadomasochistic misogyny in the more pornographic sections of the pamphlets."<sup>14</sup> Lake, however, is less interested in the specific threat dangerous women potentially posed than in what murder in general meant to English society.

Additionally, historians have attempted to incorporate studies of crime and popular literature with more traditional examinations of crime through archival records. Many of these inquiries have included discussion of women and crime in popular literature in a larger inquiry of crime and society. Paul Griffiths' article "The structure of prostitution in Elizabethan London," for example, examines representations of prostitutes and compares

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Lake, "Deeds against Nature: Cheap Print, Protestantism and Murder in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, eds. Kevin Sharp and Peter Lake (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 265.

popular literature in pamphlets and ballads with London's Bridewell court records. Griffiths is interested in examining popular attitudes towards crime and morality with a focus on prostitution. He acknowledges the unique danger of the 'lost women' and the contrast between prostitutes and bawds with proper women.<sup>15</sup> Griffiths, however is more concerned with the perception of the general threat that prostitution, and not fallen women specifically, posed to Elizabethan society. Ultimately, Griffiths asserts that popular literature is inadequate as a source for examining English social history and that pamphlets and ballads must play "a supporting role to the court book."<sup>16</sup> He advocates for a combined analysis of archival and literary sources that favors comparisons and contrasts to provide a more thorough context of seventeenth-century society.

By contrast, Vanessa McMahon's book, Murder in Shakespeare's England, makes liberal use of popular literature as a means of examining "how ordinary people and the courts interpreted homicides and how these interpretations were often contingent on external factors like gender, race, religion and social status."<sup>17</sup> Her work foregrounds pamphlets and plays before assize records, and focuses primarily on the second half of the seventeenth century. McMahon argues that murder stories reflect shifts in social and cultural concerns about crime, women, law, and order. For McMahon, popular literature is the site where early modern men and women negotiated and applied meaning to their prescribed social roles and,

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Griffiths, "The structure of prostitution in Elizabethan London" Continuity and Change 8 (1993): 40.

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths 53.

<sup>17</sup> Vanessa McMahon, Murder in Shakespeare's England (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

thus, murder stories provide invaluable context for, and can illuminate, studies of statutes and court records.<sup>18</sup> Although her work does not address the earliest crime narratives published in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, McMahon's analysis demonstrates the extent to which English culture both influenced and was reflected in popular literature.

Even earlier than McMahon and Griffiths, J.A. Sharpe, in "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England," compares indictments and coroner inquests of crime in Essex assize court records from 1560 to 1709 with representations of crime in popular literature of the same period.<sup>19</sup> Sharpe's position is that popular literature allows for an investigation of "some aspects of crime, as well as containing considerable information about contemporary attitudes towards offenders and offences."<sup>20</sup> Sharpe is careful to distinguish his argument from previous analyses of domesticity in early modern England, and largely rejects the evolutionary view of family espoused by historians such as Lawrence Stone or Edward Shorter, which sees early modern families as emotionally distant, gradually forming bonds of intimacy over time that eventually come to resemble families as we understand them today. Sharpe instead calls for a closer examination of crime in this period. To this end, he looks at domestic crime statistics to identify murders and victims and calculate changes in domestic homicides rates. Sharpe's analysis of popular crime literature limits itself to identifying the stated motives for murder, perpetrators, and victims. His examination includes court records,

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<sup>18</sup> McMahon xxii-xxiv.

<sup>19</sup> J. A. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England," The Historical Journal 24 (1981): 29-48.

<sup>20</sup> Sharpe, "Domestic" 33.

pamphlets, and ballads of male and female criminals. He concludes that domestic homicide records and literary representations do not support earlier views that see an evolutionary pattern in familial relations from the early modern period to the present day. While his assessments of crime statistics and popular literature identify valuable demographic patterns, Sharpe is not particularly concerned with the social ramifications of domestic homicide. He does not distinguish between crimes committed by men or women, nor does he reflect on what domestic homicide might have meant to contemporary Englishmen and women. His sole concern here is to examine domestic homicide in archival records and popular literature to shed light on sixteenth and seventeenth-century family life and familial relationships.

Later in 1985, Sharpe argued in “‘Last Dying Speeches’: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England” that crime pamphlets and broadsides participate in a larger sociopolitical production whose greatest concern is to reinforce authority and obedience.<sup>21</sup> Sharpe’s analysis deliberately focuses on the roles public execution, popular literature of male and female criminals, and crime played in this context. Sharpe argues that previous examinations of crime and punishment in early modern England favored a methodology that stressed the roles of courts, justices, lawyers, and the bureaucracy of law and government. Sharpe’s approach concentrates on the individual players and the function their deaths and confessions served in the state’s demonstration of power and control. However, he does not distinguish between men and women’s crime stories, seeing these narratives within the context of a complex ritual of the state’s

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<sup>21</sup> J. A. Sharpe, “‘Last Dying Speeches’: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Past and Present* 107 (1985): 145-167.



demonstration of authority and demand for social conformity and obedience. The executed criminals were “the willing central participants in a theatre of punishment, which offered not merely a spectacle, but also a reinforcement of certain values.”<sup>22</sup> Sharpe does not address the nature of the crimes represented, or the literary conventions employed in the narratives, nor does he address particular contemporary attitudes towards women and misbehavior. Rather, he places stories of female criminals in the larger context of social attitudes towards crime, punishment, and redemption.

Sharpe’s arguments, as well as those of other crime historians including Griffiths, J.S. Cockburn, and Alan MacFarlane were greatly influenced by Michel Foucault’s discussion of crime and punishment translated and published in 1976.<sup>23</sup> Foucault’s work centered on his argument that the eighteenth-century conceptions of punishment and discipline shifted focus from the criminal’s body to his soul. He assesses changing social and cultural attitudes that transformed the concept of public executions as an expression of state power to punishment that involved reforming prisoners in confinement, and out of the public sphere. Foucault sees the Enlightenment’s construction of prisons as part of a penal culture aimed at the individual’s soul where prisoners were left alone to think and feel remorse. While some crime historians, such as Paul Griffiths, minimize his impact on crime history scholarship,

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<sup>22</sup> Sharpe, “Speeches” 156.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977).

Foucault's arguments, first articulated in Discipline and Punish, continue to be debated.<sup>24</sup>

Foucault's influence is most evident in historical analyses of crime that note the relationships between authority, enforcement, hegemony, and agency, and that acknowledge the ways in which ideologies regulate representation in socio-cultural discourse. While his arguments are concerned with eighteenth and nineteenth-century crime, punishment, and criminals, they help elucidate how, as early as the sixteenth century, crime pamphlets increasingly became concerned with the redemption of both the female criminal's soul, as well as those of contemporary readers. While still executed publicly at stakes and on scaffolds, increasingly, popular literature also sought to end criminal narratives with the spiritual redemption of the sinner.

Sharpe's greatest contribution to the study of women and crime lies with his widely respected work on witchcraft in early modern England. Numerous studies on the phenomenon and its meaning to early modern society reveal a long history of scholarly fascination and debate. Sharpe himself noted in 2001, "it seems that every month brings with it a new book on the history of witchcraft: a work of synthesis, a regional study, a book exploring a new interpretation of the phenomenon, a newly edited version of a demonological text."<sup>25</sup> Sharpe's most recent works have incorporated court records of trial proceedings and testimony, conviction rates, and popular accounts of witches in pamphlets. His analyses, while skeptical of the veracity of contemporary popular print, nonetheless mine

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<sup>24</sup> Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths, eds., Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1900 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> James Sharpe, Witchcraft in Early Modern England (Harlow: Longman, 2001) ix.

pamphlet narratives for historical evidence of attitudes to and the conventional construction of witches and witchcraft.

Most recently Deborah Willis and Marion Gibson have explored the cultural significance of witchcraft to early modern English society in two strikingly different examinations. Willis examines the socio-cultural construction of witches in the context of contemporary discourses of motherhood and maternal power in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English society, incorporating psychoanalysis and new historicist criticism.<sup>26</sup> Willis includes witchcraft pamphlets, treatises, and trial records in her analysis as well as popular drama, Privy Council records, and contemporary theological and political writings. Gibson, by contrast, focuses exclusively on witchcraft pamphlets published between 1566 and 1621. Her approach is based on a consideration of witchcraft accounts as literary productions, and she sees her work as trying to reveal “the influences of literary and cultural considerations...emphasizing authorial and other motivations, narrative contradictions and textual gaps.”<sup>27</sup> Both works represent the current directions of scholarly attention to crime and popular literature that incorporate gender into a larger examination of early modern history.

Similarly, Frances Dolan’s Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700 examines crime pamphlets and ballads as “evidence of the processes

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah Willis, Malevolent Nurture: Witchhunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern Writing (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Marion Gibson, Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing (London: Routledge, 2000) 3.

of cultural formation and transformation in which they participated.”<sup>28</sup> Dolan’s assessment combines new historicist and feminist methodologies to determine how early modern English subjects, and women in particular, constructed identity, sexuality, and family. She attempts to recover “the possibilities for human agency in historical process” by examining ways in which women resisted and participated within social and ideological constraints.<sup>29</sup> Dolan’s chapters look at witches, murderous mothers, and murderous wives and husbands. Ultimately, Dolan sees female criminals as marginalized women fashioning identities and agency in a highly circumscribed society. She argues that women who did not conform to cultural norms that valued chastity, obedience, and silence were demonized. Dolan’s work was one of the earliest examinations that focused exclusively on representations of women and crime in pamphlets and ballads.

Feminist historians have continued to examine early modern English society and culture with an exclusively gendered approach that explores the ways women were shaped, subsumed or oppressed by patriarchal authority. Scholars such as Katherine Henderson, Tessa Watt, Linda Woodbridge, and Joy Wiltenburg discuss a variety of topics such as women writers, popular writing for women, images of women, and representations of domestic crime from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These historians have largely sought to give voice to women as a means of including them in the overall larger study of

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<sup>28</sup> Frances Dolan, Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 3.

<sup>29</sup> Dolan 3.

English and European Renaissance history. This approach has proven particularly valuable because it insists on including women as active contributors to and participants in society.

Laura Gowing's Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London is the most recent feminist historical inquiry concerned with the language of marriage, sexual slander, and courtship, and the ways in which these issues reflect contemporary attitudes towards morality, gender, and sex. While not looking exclusively at crime pamphlets and ballads, Gowing does include women's criminal narratives in her larger examination. Where women are the perpetrators, Gowing argues that their actions, as described in pamphlets and ballads, often served to reinforce male stereotypes of the inherently unstable and unchaste female.<sup>30</sup> Her primary focus however tends to look at how women defined sexual morality in and out of civil courts, and the ways in which society construed marriage, domestic relations, and sexuality.

In the years since Joan Gadol Kelly's notable essay, "Did women have a Renaissance," the field of women's history has expanded enormously.<sup>31</sup> Scholarship in early modern English drama in particular has yielded enthusiastic answers, and even more nuanced questions about women in Tudor-Stuart history. Building on the work of theater historian Andrew Gurr, feminist authors have shed new light on the ways women contributed to early modern culture in general, and the theater in particular. Jean Howard's extensive work on

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Gowing, Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 206.

<sup>31</sup> Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" Becoming Visible: Women in European History, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 175-178.

women's participation in and influence on the Renaissance stage as spectators and paying customers has revealed a vigorous cultural exchange about gender, class, and society where women's voices are acknowledged and contributory. Additionally, scholars such as Dympna Callaghan, Alison Findlay, and Catherine Belsey examining gender, social conflict, and women's experiences on and off stage, have revealed the ways in which dramatists and audiences debated contemporary issues and concerns on stage, in print, and in the street.<sup>32</sup> Recent feminist scholarship in drama has demonstrated the extent to which early modern English drama spoke for women and about women in a society where women played an active role shaping Protestant theology, domestic economies and households, and even the concept of femininity itself.

Phyllis Rackin and Sandra Clark's examination of women in Renaissance English drama have both contributed greatly to this thesis's analysis of murderous women in popular literature. Rackin's discussion of how history and tragedy plays configured and represented women also confronts the extent to which most feminist scholarship frequently shapes current perception of Renaissance society. Rackin's work questions how accepted or contested women's agency was in and out of the domestic sphere, and challenges readers and scholars to question "some of the assumptions that currently shape our efforts to understand Shakespeare's representations of women historically."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Clark reexamines

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Alice Arden's Crime," Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, eds. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 133-150; Dympna Callaghan, ed., A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Alison Findlay, A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Phyllis Rackin, Shakespeare and Women (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 1-5.

women's socio-political experiences and how they interrelate with women's characters on stage. Exploring categories of drama in separate chapters, Clark discusses comedies, history plays, tragedies, and news and journalist-influence plays among others. Her examination of the Arden and George Sanders' murders discusses how true crime stories affected the dramatic representations of the characters of the men and women involved and concludes, "theatre was accessible to all levels of society and in its unique representational role capable of creating new ways of understanding what has been called 'social experience' through its dramatization of human action and interaction."<sup>34</sup>

Only two works, published in the last six years have directly examined street literature, women, and crime exclusively: Susan Staub's Nature's Cruel Stepdames and Sandra Clark's Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England.<sup>35</sup> Both books examine broadsides and pamphlets that featured murderous women. Their arguments analyze the ways in which legally and economically marginalized women in early modern England asserted autonomy, authority and identity as criminals and authors. Placing her work within a growing conversation about women and crime pamphlets, Staub attempts to reproduce the most comprehensive collection of seventeenth-century women's crime pamphlets. Staub's analysis of the literature features a close reading of several pamphlets and broadsides, and includes reproductions of eleven narratives published between 1604 and

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<sup>34</sup> Sandra Clark, Renaissance Drama (Malden: Polity Press, 2007) 189.

<sup>35</sup> Sandra Clark, Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Susan Staub, Nature's Cruel Stepdames: Murderous Women in the Street Literature of Seventeenth Century England (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005).

1692. She writes: “Central to an analysis of this literature is how its portrayal of female criminals betrays anxiety about female power and sexuality at a time when increased female power was possible if not likely.”<sup>36</sup> Staub’s approach is primarily literary analysis with historical context. Clark’s book places these narratives in a largely social history context that includes crime news, domestic plays, ballads and pamphlets, analyses of crime and conviction rates, and the genesis of journalism. She writes, “what I hope to do is consider how, and with what interests in mind, crimes committed by women are shaped as subjects for representation in various forms within the developing marketplace of print.”<sup>37</sup> Both authors seek to empower their subjects by paying scholarly attention to the texts, thereby giving these women voices. Both authors examine ways in which gender played a part in the construction of identity, the nature of crime, and the stability of early modern English society. Clark and Staub’s primary goal is to remedy the exclusion of women as subjects and these texts in particular from the study of English history. Staub’s book, like McMahon’s, focuses primarily on texts published in the mid to late seventeenth century. Nonetheless, Clark and Staub’s analyses, like those of McMahon and Dolan, were useful methodological models that incorporated large numbers of texts within a focused inquiry on women, crime, and early modern English culture.

Finally, while increased attention has focused on pamphlets and broadsides, even those featuring female criminals, very little scholarship examines the images printed on their

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<sup>36</sup> Staub 8.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, Women and Crime ix.



frontispieces. This lack of scholarly analysis of English woodcuts and engravings on pamphlets, ballads, and broadsides is especially remarkable given the large number of analyses of European engravings and woodcuts of the same period.<sup>38</sup> While many authors include reprinted images from pamphlets and ballads, most scholars generally dismiss them as crude, or of little artistic or literary merit. Joad Raymond's Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain is a comprehensive analysis of the pamphlet trade in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England that addresses pamphlet sellers, authors, publishers, and the news, book, and broadside trades. While he includes references to woodcuts, his analysis concludes simply "old iconography could be recycled to report on unprecedented events."<sup>39</sup> Natascha Wurzbach's analysis of English street ballads dismisses the artistic or iconographic significance of woodcuts in relation to printed broadsides, stating,

the woodcut illustration on the broadside, increasingly common in the seventeenth century, was a crude affair and had little actual illustrative function with regard to the

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<sup>38</sup> Max Geisberg, The German Single Leaf Woodcut, trans. Walter Strauss, 4 vols. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974); Linda C. Hulst, The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Max Lehrs, Late Gothic Engravings of Germany and the Netherlands, ed. A. Hyatt Major (New York: Dover, 1969); (Simon Schama, The Embarrassment of Riches (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987). Schama incorporates woodcut and engraved images in his assessment of seventeenth-century Holland. He addresses how these images, among other fine, decorative, and popular arts reflected social, political, economic, and religious discourse in Dutch culture; Robert Scribner, For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Alison Stewart, Before Bruegel Sebald Beham and the Origins of Peasant Festival Imagery (Grand Rapids: Ashgate, Limited, 2008); James Grantham Turner, ed., Sexuality and gender in early modern Europe: Institutions, texts, images (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Turner's book includes articles that address representations of marriage, sex, feminine beauty, and even masculinity in images, and texts. Two contributing authors in particular, Mary Pardo and Margaret Rosenthal, include printed images in their analyses of gender in the Italian Renaissance.

<sup>39</sup> Joad Raymond, Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 253.

text. Since there were usually only one or two figures involved it was possible to use an idea several times over, which resulted not infrequently in a crass incongruence between illustration and text...though its principal function of helping to sell the product should not be underestimated.<sup>40</sup>

However, as Tessa Watt asserts regarding a proliferation of woodcut images of Biblical figures and scenes, “familiarity with the decorative arts, and a highly developed sense of visual allegory, is taken for granted in the (early modern) audience.”<sup>41</sup> Watt’s examination of the woodcut and copper engraving trade finds “in the early seventeenth-century, woodcuts on broadsides and pamphlets became more closely related to the subject of the text,” with woodcuts increasingly being commissioned for each published work.<sup>42</sup> Watt’s discussion of popular print images sees godly pamphlets and ballads as instruments of a shared visual culture that exists in “the same iconographical universe inhabited by ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ classes, both rural and urban.”<sup>43</sup> Adam Fox’s study of literacy and the oral tradition in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England stresses the pervasiveness of visual communication in everyday society.<sup>44</sup> Fox asserts that in a society “in which literacy is limited, pictures, signs, and symbolic objects served an important function in conveying

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<sup>40</sup> Natascha Wurzbach, The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550-1650 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 9.

<sup>41</sup> Tessa Watt, Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640 Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 138.

<sup>42</sup> Watt 149.

<sup>43</sup> Watt 216.

<sup>44</sup> Adam Fox, “Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule in Jacobean England” Past and Present 143 (1994) 35.

meanings and messages to the majority,” and he sees visual imagery as, “a stimulus to cultural invention in early modern England.”<sup>45</sup>

As the only recent work to examine woodcuts and engravings from popular print, Keith Moxley’s Peasants Warriors and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation, published in 1989, is a particularly valuable model for an investigation of English woodcuts on pamphlets and ballads. Rejecting the commonly held opinion that these images were simply a form of mass art that only reflected the values of the lower classes, Moxley argues that woodcuts served to promote political and social ideas. His approach considers the printed artwork, “in light of the way analogous themes were used in the written culture of the sixteenth century.”<sup>46</sup> He further asserts that popular imagery was didactic in nature and served as a way of disseminating attitudes held by upper and middle classes to the illiterate poorer populace.<sup>47</sup> Moxley, like the noted art historian Erwin Panofsky, argues that narratives and images are both “projections of cultural consciousness,” and argues for an analysis of visual motifs consciously informed by linguistic motifs, or signs.<sup>48</sup> According to this methodology, an interpretation of early modern English woodcuts in popular literature is dependent on identifying analogous themes in contemporary written culture. Diane Russell’s Eva/Ave: Women in Renaissance and Baroque Prints, written in 1990, also examines

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<sup>45</sup> Fox 33.

<sup>46</sup> Keith Moxley, Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 7.

<sup>47</sup> Moxley 34.

<sup>48</sup> Moxley 7.

iconographic tropes of woman in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century woodcuts and engravings. Russell, like Moxley, identifies the ways in which European images reflected cultural constructions of woman. While most of her analyses focus on Italian, French, and German images, her arguments place her very much in the recent methodological traditions of English feminist history scholars and inform the methodological approach used here.

Murder stories in popular print were based on actual crimes that were recorded in assize records, and while many records no longer exist, the murders themselves are historical evidence of early modern English social and legal history. The analysis of crime and crime narratives, coined “micro-history” as a historiographic methodology presented in Guido Ruggiero’s book History from Crime, is a particularly useful approach to English popular print as it “is also intimately related to the classificatory systems by which a society orders itself. In the identification of a particular action as a crime, one encounters the social and cultural system defining itself.”<sup>49</sup> As an overall methodology, then, this thesis employs a close-reading literary analysis within a micro-historical framework.

Natalie Zemon-Davis’s study of sixteenth-century French pardon tales, Fiction in the Archives, argues criminal pardon tales share similarities in structure, plot, and characters, and participate in a collective cultural narrative. Although they involved different homicides, clerks, judges, and criminals from different classes, they all feature a common story arc that was a product of the collective efforts of all players involved in the supplication process. Davis argues that milkmaid and gentleman alike engaged in a common social exchange with

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, History from Crime (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1994) 227.

cultural capital. Finally, Davis argues these pardon tales are not an example of high culture and power imposing itself on a lower order. Rather, these stories are representative of the fluidity of a “cultural exchange...a common discourse about violence and its pacification.”<sup>50</sup>

These narratives and illustrations of promiscuous and murderous women follow a consistent literary formula while also articulating a variety of contemporary communal interests in crime, social disruption, theology, social structure and gender roles. Furthermore, the similar narrative structure, titles, literary themes, and didactic tone of many of these texts suggest that, like Zemon-Davis’ pardon tales, murder stories also adhered to particular literary conventions. English women’s crime narratives and their imagery then, also represent a kind of cultural exchange. In addition, crime narratives featuring female protagonists present victims, crimes, and the criminal’s repentance in a uniquely feminine context. Furthermore, the texts’ common plot structures, characters, and metaphorically happy-endings all share in a popular narrative that itself participates in larger social and cultural discourses regarding crime, the nature of women, and social and theological order. Unlike Zemon-Davis’s tales, however, English popular print was created and sold to the public at large. These stories were related, and their characters adjudged, in a common court of public opinion. The intended audiences were not civil and religious authorities but consumers willing to pay pennies to experience the vicarious thrill and danger of women’s criminal escapades and human tragedy.

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<sup>50</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in 16<sup>th</sup>-Century France (Palo Alto: Stanford U P, 1987) 112.

In the sense that these narratives are each individual anecdotes, capable of revealing insight into early modern English culture, society, and ideology, this essay follows a New Historicist approach. The influence of New Historicism can hardly be minimized within the scholarship of English Renaissance literature. The difficulty of categorizing New Historicism as either a singular methodological approach or a school of inquiry notwithstanding, this theoretical model of literary inquiry offers,

the isolation of a resonant textual fragment that is revealed, under the pressure of analysis, to represent the work from which it is drawn and the particular culture in which that work was produced and consumed. That culture in turn renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterized by a particular set of circumstances, structures, and assumptions and as something that conveys the life-world of that moment.<sup>51</sup>

Pamphlets, ballads, and plays of murderous women are texts that represent, reflect, and challenge social and cultural constructions of both good and bad women. Elite and popular debates about the nature of women, and women's sin, motherhood, marriage, and communal order form the subtexts to popular women's crime literature. These murder narratives offer insights into contemporary social attitudes towards crime and sin, punishment, redemption, families, and women. In turn they demonstrate the ways non-elite men and women confronted, understood, and debated some of the most profound issues of their lives.

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<sup>51</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, Practicing New Historicism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 35.

New Historicism is useful as well in historical inquiries presenting, as it does, the opportunity to “interrupt the Big Stories,” and reveal something of the lives of otherwise anonymous men and women who comprised the majority of the population of early modern England.<sup>52</sup> The “Big Stories” referenced in Practicing New Historicism are the kinds of “top down” histories against which New Historicist scholars, among others, initially reacted. This term, however, can be reappropriated to include the kinds of “top down” stories scholars employ for themselves in shaping their methodological or theoretical approaches to cultural history.

Considerable scholarly work in the last thirty years has focused on women in the popular literature of the seventeenth century, and the ways in which murderous wives, mothers, and witches acted outside the societal norms of prescribed femininity as articulated by writers and moralists of the period. Scholars such as Susan Staub, Tessa Watt, Sandra Clark, Joy Wiltenburg, and Frances Dolan, in particular, argue that pamphlets, ballads, and plays not only articulated particular fears about women’s proclivity for promiscuity and violence, but that they also seek to control women by reasserting patriarchal power and restoring social harmony. Their varied and insightful analyses explore the ways in which marginalized and criminal women resisted normative ideals that posited virtuous women as chaste, silent, and obedient.<sup>53</sup> Patriarchy as the master narrative of women’s history has thus

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<sup>52</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 52.

<sup>53</sup> Suzanne Hull, Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640 (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982) 142. This phrase, now frequently and reflexively employed as a descriptive for ideal English Renaissance feminine behavior, was first employed by Hull in her examination of printed works directed to women in early modern England.

generally informed and shaped much of feminist historical and literary scholarship, and academics have largely accepted a narrative that posits women struggling in restricted social roles, subjugated by the patriarchal society of early Modern England.

Some scholars, however, have begun to reexamine this narrative. In her essay on early modern culture and patriarchy, Phyllis Rackin asserts,

The historical evidence I have sampled undermines the current scholarly consensus that respectable women were expected to stay at home, that they were economically dependent on fathers and husbands, and that they were subjected to constant surveillance by jealous men, obsessively anxious about their sexual fidelity. I found it because I was looking for it.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, in her work on women, sexual slander, and litigation, Laura Gowing argues for analyses of early modern English society that recognize a multiplicity of identities for women beyond the ideal and compulsory prescripts identifying virtuous women as chaste, silent, and obedient. Gowing does not dismiss a patriarchal narrative as an integral characteristic of society but cautions against a hegemonic interpretation, stating,

Analyses of a society that was patriarchal in the original sense of the word – ruled by the father(s) - have, ironically, subsumed in this sense the feminist analysis of patriarchy, in the sense of a wide-ranging domination of women by men. Discussion of early modern patriarchy has, as a result, been very largely devoid of a considered evaluation of the process, form, and results of women's oppression by men.

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<sup>54</sup> Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare, Dymphna Callaghan, ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) 51.



Correspondingly, gender has become little more than another social variable, like age or class. Yet without taking gender into account, reading it as a both disruptive and conservative element in the structure of society, we miss the point of domestic, sexual, and social relations.<sup>55</sup>

While she acknowledges that women may be operating within, and accepting of patriarchal definitions of acceptable feminine behavior, Gowing argues that gender was not a universal totalizing form of identity.

Early modern English works by and about women and women's lives thus illustrate the challenges inherent in an uncritical acceptance of the assumption that virtuous women were consistently silent, chaste, and obedient. Gowing writes, "as women's history of the early modern period has drawn the sharp and important line between precept and practice, the difficulty of sorting out women's experience from the perceptions of the men who, almost invariably, record it remains."<sup>56</sup> Popular print may be one area where women's experience, albeit at an extreme and antisocial level, is shaped in part by female criminals, authors, and consumers. Certainly, scholars accept that women were the most likely authors of a flurry of sixteenth-century treatises defending women, and discussing childcare, midwifery, medicinal remedies, and household maintenance.<sup>57</sup> The participation of women

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<sup>55</sup> Gowing, Domestic Dangers 5.

<sup>56</sup> Gowing, Domestic Dangers 8.

<sup>57</sup> Kate Aughterson, ed., Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook (London: Routledge, 1995); Kate Chedgoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill, eds., Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998); Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, Half

in the cultural exchange of popular print is significant because it sheds light on the ways in which women who deviated from behavioral norms, in and out of crime stories, may have been perceived within the social context of early modern England.

Finally, Patricia Fumerton's introduction of Renaissance Culture and the Everyday defends analyses of everyday culture, and in this case household cookbooks, asserting,

One of the values of the everyday is that it provides comfort and reassurance that life is proceeding apace, with no threat of unsettling change. But another, paradoxical value is that it provides a regular outlet for something different and above the regular. In the common act of torturing animals the Renaissance man or woman experienced something uncommon – the rush of adrenaline that added spice to everyday life. In sum, it is often precisely in the trivial details of everyday life that Renaissance men and women invested their lives with extra-ordinary meaning.<sup>58</sup>

Fumerton's remarks about sixteenth-century cookery instructions could just as easily be applied to women's murder pamphlets of the same period. While these are stories of marriages, households, families, and communities writ larger than life, they invariably involve tensions over everyday concerns such as the daily economy of goods and services in towns and villages, disputes over common lands, marital and domestic tensions, household

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Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 20-24.

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt eds., Renaissance Culture and the Everyday (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 6.

debts, and the security of food, clothing, and shelter. At the heart of each of these stories are women, pursuing ordinary lives, whose desires compel them to extraordinary ends.

### Primary Source Materials

The primary sources centrally employed within this analysis include a collection of approximately forty-four pamphlets and broadsides (in ballad and prose form), eight plays, and twenty woodcut engravings, all published in England between 1558 and 1625. All feature murderous women as the main characters or central figures. Some tales purport to be written by the women themselves; in others, a self-proclaimed eyewitness or omniscient narrator tells the story in the third person. All these texts and prints are available on microfilm and online through Pollard and Redgrave's English Short Title Catalogue, part of the Early English Books Online database; many of these texts are also available through various printed collections, as indicated in the notes and in the bibliography.

Also included are sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts that provide contemporary context, including observations on popular literature, treatises on the nature of women and the dangerous temptations believed posed by luxurious clothing and cosmetics, writings on witchcraft, and advice manuals on parenting, household management, and marriage. Many of these texts are also included in published modern collections and anthologies, as well as in their earliest original editions in Pollard and Redgrave's English Short Title Catalogue.

## **CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS**

This section will examine early modern constructions of good and bad women.

While most ordinary early modern women led routine, if anonymous, lives tending to their households, businesses, and family concerns, some gained public notoriety for their extraordinary exploits. A review of laws, criminal records of assize courts, and contemporary literature reflects considerable concern for the behavior and morality of these fallen women, as well as the dangerous allure of vice that tempted all women. What emerges from these contexts is a developing characterization of the sinful woman.

### Historical Contexts

#### Women and Crime

This period of historical inquiry is notable for the enactment of laws regarding criminal acts perpetrated by women. Murdering one's husband, a capital offense, was deemed a form of felony treason under the Statute of Treasons in 1532 and defined by the jurist William Lambarde as the murder of a social superior by an inferior: "If a Clarke doe maliciously kill his Prelate (or superior) to whom he oweth obedience; or a wife, her husband; or a servant the master or mistresse (who have a civile soveraigntie over them)

this will be Petite Treason.”<sup>59</sup> In 1563, “An Act against Conjurations, Inchantments and Witchcrafts” reestablished witchcraft, and particularly murder committed through witchcraft, as a felony punishable by death. This was not the first statute legislating witchcraft however; it was legally defined as a crime under Henry VIII’s statute 33 in 1542, though repealed in 1547.<sup>60</sup> Because witchcraft in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was perceived primarily as a crime of maleficium rather than devil worshipping, witches were believed to be malevolent, mischievous creatures who brought harm to the community. Keith Thomas argues that witchcraft was legally perceived as an anti-social crime, a conclusion also argued by leading witchcraft historians.<sup>61</sup> According to Thomas, witches were threats to social stability. While witches might work in league with the Devil, their trials and convictions were based on the harm they did to fellow neighbors. In 1604 however, under King James I, injuring people through use of witchcraft became a capital offence, as did conjuring spirits and using dead body parts for spells or enchantment. Additionally, in 1624, a law prohibiting infanticide was enacted making it illegal for any woman who was

delivered of any issue of the body, male or female, which being born alive,  
should by the laws of this realm be a bastard, and that she endeavour  
privately either by drowning or secret burying thereof, or any other way,

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<sup>59</sup> William Lambarde, Eirenarcha: or The Office of the Justices of Peace (London, 1579) 241.

<sup>60</sup> Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971; London: Penguin, 1991) 525-540.

<sup>61</sup> Annabel Gregory, “Witchcraft, Politics And ‘Good Neighbourhood’ In Early Seventeenth-Century Rye” Past and Present 133 (1991) 31-66; Alan MacFarlane, Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (London: Routledge, 1970) 168-177; James Sharpe, Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 113; Thomas, Religion 533.

either by herself or the procuring of others, so to conceal the death thereof, as that it may not come to light, whether it be born alive or not, but be concealed, in every such case the mother so offending shall suffer death as in the case of murder except such mother can make proof by one witness at the least, that the child (whose death was by her intended to be concealed) was born dead.<sup>62</sup>

While a woman's status under the law might lessen her criminal liability as a "'feme covert' whose legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband... (and) put the wife in the same category as 'children wards, lunatic, idiots, and outlaws,'" women were nonetheless regarded as having the potential for criminal behavior and committing crimes that are perceived in uniquely feminine contexts.<sup>63</sup> Cynthia Herrup argues that the years between 1590 and 1630 experienced particularly high levels of prosecution for homicide, on the whole, amidst a period of high unemployment, prices, and general social tension.<sup>64</sup> Sandra Clark asserts that while conviction rates were especially high in this period, crime in general was an underreported phenomenon. Nonetheless, she concurs with Herrup that an increased concern with public order, rather than an outbreak of crime, resulted in greater state authority

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<sup>62</sup> R.W. Malcolmson, "Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century," Crime in England 1550-1800, ed. J.S. Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 196-197.

<sup>63</sup> Sandra Clark, Women and Crime 42; Laura Gowing, Domestic Dangers 1-12. The same might be said of male criminals whose criminal behaviors were defined according to contemporary beliefs about the nature of men. Laura Gowing addresses gender and social norms and emphasizes the naturalized separation of roles and natures according to gender in early modern ideology.

<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Herrup, The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1987) 38.

exercising increased legislation of criminal activity.<sup>65</sup> Readers of popular literature, however, may have felt that murder was on the rise throughout England given the frequency and number of crime pamphlets and ballads published. Philippe Rosenberg's tally of criminal texts printed between 1550 and 1750, and listed in the Short Title Catalogue, finds a steady increase in the numbers of pamphlets and ballads printed, with the greatest numbers of printed material published from 1625 to 1675.<sup>66</sup> By most accounts, however, measurable criminal activity does not accord with popular perceptions of women's crime.<sup>67</sup> James Sharpe's examination of domestic homicide in Essex indicates that fourteen percent of the defendants accused of homicide between 1560 and 1709 were women, admittedly a relatively high rate.<sup>68</sup> However, although women were more typically prosecuted for a range of criminal behaviors such as theft, vagrancy, or failing to attend church, in the popular literature, women criminals are consistently portrayed as murderers of husbands, infants, children, and servants.

A review of assize records from London's Middlesex courts between 1558 and 1625 reveals that far more men were accused of murder than women, and that moreover, most

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<sup>65</sup> Clark, Women and Crime 34-5.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Griffiths, "Introduction: Punishing the English," Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1900 eds., Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 11.

<sup>67</sup> J.S. Cockburn, "The Nature and Incidence of Crime in England 1559-1625: A Preliminary Survey," Crime in England, 1559-1625, ed. J.S. Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 56.

<sup>68</sup> J. A. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide" 37.

murders associated with women involved witchcraft or infanticide.<sup>69</sup> Assize records, almost certainly incomplete, indicate sixty-five murders committed by women. Of these, twenty-two cases were infanticides committed by mothers, twenty-two were witchcraft murders, one was husband-murder, two were servant-murders, one was patricide, and one servant murdered her mistress. Sixteen murders were committed by women against other women, and include four cases where records indicate the women lived together in the same household. Sharpe's findings correlate with this rough survey. In approximately eighty murder accusations between 1560 and 1709, forty-nine victims were familial or domestic servants and apprentices, while thirty-one victims were non-familial. Furthermore, Sharpe finds that of familial murders, approximately half were infanticides. In this same period in the Middlesex assize records, men were accused of approximately one hundred thirty-seven murders, while Sharpe's conclusions find 482 men accused of homicide at the Essex assizes.<sup>70</sup>

By contrast, a review of the murder pamphlets and ballads reveals almost equal numbers of published stories of male and female murderers, with the greatest number of narratives featuring homicidal wives. None of the criminal records feature women who murder strangers. Of the texts included in this thesis, sixteen plays, pamphlets and ballads feature wives who murder their husbands, five detail murders of non-family victims, four relate infanticides, four relate murders of family members or household servants, and two

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<sup>69</sup> "Middlesex Sessions Rolls 1558-1625," British History Online 2009, University of London and History of Parliament Trust, 17 February 2009 < <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=>>.

<sup>70</sup> Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide" 37.



relate murders of masters. Like court cases, pamphlets, ballads, and plays consistently present murders committed by women against victims they are related to, live with, or otherwise know intimately, throwing the nature of the formal relationships they share, as husband/wife, mistress/servant, lovers, and siblings into the spotlight. These are narratives of murder embellished with subplots of adultery, greed, vengeance, and betrayal. While the courts defined crimes under the law, murder texts define women's sin.

### Literary Contexts

#### The Nature of Women in English Renaissance Culture

Murderers or not, early modern conceptions of women, and the nature of woman, were full of contradictions, suspicion, and occasionally outright hatred. At the same time growing numbers of women's crime stories were published, the period also experienced a significant increase in the number of printed materials debating the nature and worth of women. Many literary attacks and defenses were written by both male and female authors.<sup>71</sup> One of the earliest authors in the pamphlet war of the debate about women, Edward Gosynhill, published The Schoolhouse of women, in 1541, claiming that the feminine sex,

Been evil to please and worse to trust,  
Crabbed and cumbrous when themselves lust.  
Have tongue at large, voice loud and shrill  
Of words wondrous, passing store,

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<sup>71</sup> Henderson and McManus, Half Humankind 3-11.

Stomach stout, with froward will,  
And namely when ye touch the sore  
With one bare word or little more,  
They flush and flame, as hot as fire,  
And swell as a toad for fervent ire...  
Reason will they not attend,  
But tell their own tale to the end.<sup>72</sup>

While the women included in murder narratives were thought to be especially dangerous to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social order, all women were a source of anxiety for some elements of English society. Many male writers, like Gosynhill, argued for the need to control women and found their justification in Biblical texts, particularly the New Testament, and in the classical texts of Aristotle, Plato, and St. Augustine. These authors believed women were more prone than men to irrational behavior, passion, violence, and general vice, and, thus, inclined to sexual promiscuity and sin. This commonly accepted avenue of Renaissance thought also conceived of women as anatomically incomplete. Their physical construction in the womb was a mistake or defect in their formation, and women were thus seen at birth as physically malformed versions of the preferred male physique. The most widely read author advocating this physiological model was Galen, who argued,

The woman is less perfect than the man...For the parts were formed within her  
when she was still a foetus, but could not because of the defect in the heat emerge

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<sup>72</sup> Edward Gosynhill, The Schoolhouse of women (London, 1541), Aughterson 150.

and project on the outside, and this, though making the animal itself that was being formed less perfect than one that is complete in all respects, provided no small advantage for the race: for there needs must be a female.<sup>73</sup>

If men were created in God's image, moreover, women then, having no divine role model, were inherently inferior. John Calvin preached, "for God could have created Eve out of the earth as well as he did Adam, but he would not...the wife knowing herself to have none other being but of the man, should bear her subjection patiently and with a willing mind."<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, as descendents of Eve, women were morally weaker than men, and more prone to irrational behavior, passion, violence, and lust.<sup>75</sup> Their control by men, families and communities was thus of the utmost importance to English society, according to these precepts. An extreme and possibly satiric view in The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle Froward and Unconstant Women stated:

a woman was made to be a helper unto man, and so they are  
indeede: for she helpeth to spend and consume that which man  
painfully getteth. Hee also saith that they were made of the ribbe  
of a man, and that their froward nature sheweth; for a ribbe is a  
crooked thing, good for nothing else, and women are crooked by

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<sup>73</sup> Galen, On the usefulness of the parts of the body, trans. Mararet Tallmadge May (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) 630-632.

<sup>74</sup> John Calvin, "Sermons" (London, 1577) Renaissance Woman: Constructions of Femininity in England ed. Kate Aughterson (London: Routledge, 1995) 15.

<sup>75</sup> Laura Gowing, Domestic Dangers 2-3.

nature: for small occasion will cause them to be angry. Again, in a manner, shee was no sonner made, but straightway her mind was set upon mischiefe, for by her aspiring minde and wanton will, shee quickly procured mans fall, and therefore ever since they are and have beene a woe unto man...<sup>76</sup>

This view of women, however, was not uncontested. In response to The arraignment of lewd, forward and idle women, Rachel Speght wrote,

Secondly, the material cause or matter whereof woman was made was of a reined mould, if I may so speak; for man was created of the dust of the earth, but woman was made of a part of man after that he was a living soul: yet was she not produced from Adam's foot, to be his too low inferior; nor from his head to be his superior; but from his side, near his heart, to be his equal...man was the only object which she did resemble. For as God gave man a lofty countenance, that he might look up toward heaven, so did he likewise give unto woman, and as the temperature of man's body is excellent, so is woman's....man and woman only have their skins clear and smooth. And (that more is) in the image of God were they both created, yea and to be brief, all the parts of their bodies, both external and internal were correspondent and meet each for other.<sup>77</sup>

Aemilia Lanyer chastised men who criticized the female sex, writing,

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<sup>76</sup> Joseph Swetnam, The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and unconstant women (London, 1615) B8.

<sup>77</sup> Rachel Speght, A mouzell for Melastomus (London, 1617) D2.

all women deserve not to be blamed...evil-disposed men, who forgetting they were born of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the means of women they would be quite extinguished out of the world and a final end of them all, do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred only to give way and utterance to their want of discretion and goodness.<sup>78</sup>

Even Gosynhill himself wrote a defense of women, publishing The prayse of all women, called Mulieru pean, in 1542. Men and women alike published similar defenses throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries articulating a range of opinions about women's inherent morality, many employing conventional strategies that, among others, listed notable virtuous women throughout history as an answer to weak or sinful women referenced by authors like Gosynhill.<sup>79</sup> Linda Woodbridge's analysis of English Renaissance literature about the nature of women concludes that many of the defenses of women "accomplish little more for women's cause than to create a stereotype of the 'good' woman to counter the misogynist's stereotype of the 'bad.'"<sup>80</sup> Her work, however, demonstrates the extent to which early modern writers and readers were conversant, if not necessarily in agreement, about the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' women. With bad women as their protagonists, murder texts participate in this discourse to an even wider degree given the number of illiterate consumers

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<sup>78</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, Salve dues rex judaeorum (London: 1611) F3.

<sup>79</sup> Extensive analysis of the "querelles des femmes" tradition, as well as literary debates about the nature of women are included in Aughterson's anthology Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook; Usher Henderson and McManus, Half Humankind; Hull, Chaste, Silent and Obedient; Linda Woodbridge, Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620 (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> Woodbridge, Women and the English Renaissance 38.

who could see plays, hear pamphlet stories, and sing ballads. Moreover, they consciously construct characters that violently redefine and amplify the concept of bad women.

Woodcut illustrations on the covers of many crime pamphlets and other forms of popular print participate in an iconographic language that drew on conventional stereotypes of sinful women. For consumers of popular literature, illustrations depicting women with crooked bodies signaled their moral corruption within the texts. Because outward deformities were seen to signify interior spiritual and moral corruption, witches by definition were physically ugly, abnormal, and repugnant, and thus, Swetnam's "crooked" women are repeatedly found on the cover of witchcraft pamphlets as shown in fig. 1. Reginald Scot, the noted witchcraft skeptic, articulates this belief in his description of a stereotypical witch: "One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious...They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them."<sup>81</sup> While Scot did not believe in the possibility of actual witchcraft, he was clearly quite familiar with the conventional trope of 'witch.' Moreover, many of Scot's primary sources for his treatise were in fact popularly published witchcraft pamphlets.<sup>82</sup> Identical images of witches are reprinted for different texts, and even different representations of witches feature conventional motifs associated with witchcraft. Scot's descriptions of witches' appearances

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<sup>81</sup> Reginald Scot, The Discovery of Witchcraft (London, 1584) reprinted (New York: Dover, 1972), 4.

<sup>82</sup> Scot references the stories of Elizabeth Stile and Agnes Waterhouse in Rehearsall both straung and true (London, 1579), Richard Galis A brief treatise, the mass examination and trial of over a dozen accused witches in W.W. A True and Juste Record (London, 1582), and Elizabeth Frauncis in Unknown, The Examination and Confession of certaine Wytches (London, 1566) throughout his lengthy essay.

as common knowledge are both dependent on and informed by woodcut illustrations in crime pamphlets.

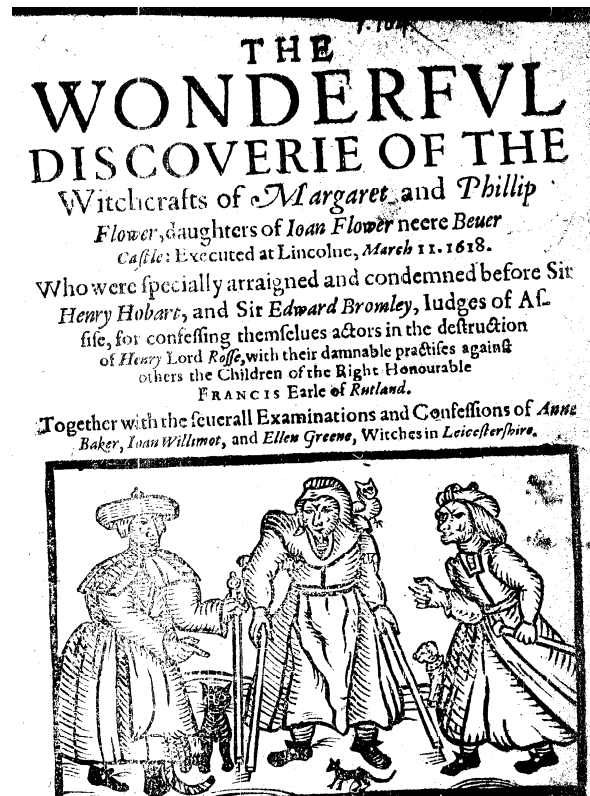


Fig. 1. The Flower Witches, woodcut from The wonderful discoverie of the witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower (London, 1619), The British Library Board C.27.b.35.

Some of the crime pamphlets feature illustrations of murderesses committing their crimes wearing elegant clothing, and many of the narratives focus on a murderess's desire for fine clothing and jewels. Contemporary writers were concerned about the influence of fashion on women's morality, and immoral women were easily identified on the covers of these treatises by their sumptuous clothes, including full farthingales and large ruffs. Thomas Becon articulated one of the more direct connections between clothing and virtue stating,

The lightness of apparel is a plain demonstration of the lightness of the mind:  
So that whatsoever woman delight in gorgeous garments, she setteth forth  
herself to sale and declareth evidently her incontinency both of body and mind  
look how much the body is beautified with the gallantness of apparel, so much  
is the mind deformed with the corruption or arrogancy and vainglory.<sup>83</sup>

The outrageous Swetnam, at the extreme end of this spectrum of opinion, opined, “if a womans face glitter...and if she be deckt up in gorgeous apparel, then a thousand to one but shee will love to walke where she may get acquaintance;..and twenty to one that if a woman love gadding, but that shee will pawne her honesty to please her fantasie.”<sup>84</sup> This pamphlet featured a woman in extravagant finery on the cover. Joseph Hall’s description of a woman in Cheapside in his 1618 sermon links vanity and the greed for beautiful apparel with sin:

Here is nothing to be seen but a vardingale, a yellow ruff,  
and a periwig, with perhaps some feather waving in the top;  
three things for which he could not tell how to find a name. And if  
then he should run before her, to see if by the foreside he might  
guess what it were, when his eyes should meet with a powdered  
frizzle, a painted hide, shadowed with a fan not more painted,  
breasts displayed betwixt a painted cloth skin how would he  
more bless himself to think what mixture in nature could be

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas Becon, “Catechism,” Works (London, 1564), Aughterson 110.

<sup>84</sup> Swetnam 15.



guilty of such a monster.<sup>85</sup>

More ominously, Thomas Tuke published a treatise in 1616, entitled A treatise against painting and tincturing of women, with a subtitle stating, “Wherein the abominable sinnes of Murther and Poysoning, Pride and Ambition, Adultery and Witchcraft, are set foorth and discovered.”<sup>86</sup> The image accompanying the text features a woman in an embroidered dress with full farthingale, feathers, jewels, lace, and a substantial ruff. Tuke directly linked a fondness for cosmetics, jewels, and sumptuous clothes with witchcraft and murder. Alistair Bellany’s article, “Mistress Turner’s Deadly Sins: Sartorial Transgression, Court Scandal, and Politics in Early Stuart England,” explores the connection between luxurious clothing, corrupted virtue, and murder demonstrated in the trial and execution of Mistress Ann Turner for killing Thomas Overbury in 1615. The article of clothing at the center of the scandal, according to Bellany, was Mistress Turner’s yellow ruff, and he argues

Many of these familiar connections between sin, monstrosity, and the ruff had been literalized in a 1566 broadside detailing the monstrous birth of a baby girl...The “ruffs” around the child’s neck...were ‘double and as it were thick gathered much like unto the ruffs that many do use to wear about their necks.’ A verse...interpreted the birth for the reader as a sign

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<sup>85</sup> John Hall, “The Righteous Mammon,” Sermon VII (1618), ed. Philip Wynter, The works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1863), 147.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Tuke, A treatise against painting and tincturing of and women (London, 1616).

From God against 'This ruffeling world in ruffs all rolled.'<sup>87</sup>

While other images in pamphlets and treatises employ similar motifs that further promulgated early modern perceptions of the close relationship between vanity and vice, the Overbury case's popularity evidenced in at least sixteen pamphlets, including Thomas Tuke's treatise, as well as several ballads and plays, underscores the extent to which Elizabethan and Stuart culture was versed in the sartorial language of sin. The murder pamphlets exemplify Tuke's warning. Women who are tempted by riches and vanity are prone to sins that will inevitably transform them into monstrous creatures and bloody tigresses. For the murderers discussed here, the perceived relationship of vanity, greed, and lust, with murder and witchcraft, proves to be a common and critical literary and artistic leitmotif.

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<sup>87</sup> Alistair Bellany, "Mistress Turner's Deadly Sins: Sartorial Transgression, Court Scandal, and Politics in Early Stuart England," The Huntington Library Quarterly 58 (1995): 193.



are, in essence, representations of bad marriages, and because the most common precipitating factor for wives who murder their husbands in early modern texts is an illicit love affair, murderous wives, by definition, draw attention to and confront not only the tensions within their own households but larger societal concerns about marital relations and family households in general. Outside of husbands, in popular literature, women's murder victims are invariably servants, children, or other family members. Murder narratives of all genres present criminal women in domestic crises, reflecting not only gendered attitudes about the nature of women's crimes, but also contemporary concerns for domestic and national order.

The number of treatises regarding marriage and its importance to men, women, and the monarchy attests to the significance of the institution of marriage in early modern English society. Moreover, treatises and handbooks published in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries expound on the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives, and present a diversity of views. Most, however, perceive marriage as hierarchical in nature, strictly heterosexual, founded in Christian theology, and modeled after the first Biblical husband and wife, Adam and Eve. Despite their lack of correspondence to the daily lives and experiences of early modern English families, the patriarchal ordered household, "where hierarchical rules regulated every personal relationship," predominates descriptions of traditional marriages in many handbooks and manuals.<sup>88</sup> Queen Elizabeth's 1559 Act of Uniformity, which required sermons and homilies to be read to congregations, articulated and disseminated the official church position,

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<sup>88</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers* 185.

Ye wives be ye in subjection to obey your own husband. To obey is another thing than to control or command, which they may do to their children and and to their family. But as for their husbands, them must they obey, and cease from commanding and perform subjection. For this surely doth nourish concord very much when the wife is ready at hand at her husband's commandment, when she apply herself to his will, when she endeavoreth herself to seek his contentation and to do him pleasure, when she will eschew all things that might offend him.<sup>89</sup>

Some authors, like the Puritans Robert Dod and John Cleaver, saw a wife's submission to her husband in theological terms, exhorting, "as the church should depend upon the wisdom and discretion and will of Christ...so must the wife also submit and apply herself to the discretion and will of her husband, even as the government and conduct of everything resteth in the head, not in the body."<sup>90</sup> This advocacy of patriarchal hierarchy requiring wifely subservience is reiterated in several treatises even when the wife's importance to the household and her personal feelings are considered and articulated. Dorothy Leigh asserts, "if she bee thy wife she is always too good to be thy servant, and worthy to be thy fellow," while also advising wives, "women...give men the first and chief place: yet let us labour to come in the second."<sup>91</sup> Most of these treatises appear to be written for men, with men's needs in mind.

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<sup>89</sup> Certain sermons or homilies appointed to be read in churches (London, 1562), Aughterson, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Dod and John Cleaver, A godly form of household government (London, 1598) 225.

<sup>91</sup> Dorothy Leigh, The Mothers Blessing (London, 1616) 6.

Writing three years after Leigh, William Whately states that a wife's duty is comprised of two components, "The first is to acknowledge her inferiority, the next to carry herself as inferior. First then, the wife's judgement must be convinced that she is not her husband's equal, yea that her husband is her better by far."<sup>92</sup> Patriarchal hierarchy as the framework for households was thought essential to maintaining domestic order.

Among the most popular, William Gouge's Of domesticall duties argued for a traditional, patriarchal structured marriage that also depended on mutual respect, affection, trust, and Christian piety: "Though there seem to be never so little disparity, yet God having so expressly appointed subjection, it ought to be acknowledged: and though husband and Wife may mutually serve one another through love, yet the apostle suffereth not a woman to rule over the man."<sup>93</sup> Gouge's comprehensive manual expounds in great detail on the wife's ideal responsibilities and conduct in her marriage and toward her husband. Among his lists of do's and don'ts, Gouge states that wives must not, "take money out of their husbands' closets, or other like places where he laith it," or "have what allowance they think best for themselves and family, and scornfully say, they will not be at their husband's finding: they know best what allowance is fittest for the family."<sup>94</sup> Additionally, Gouge argued that wives must not "have their own will about servants...or bind themselves unto without their husband's consent or knowledge: herein especially offend such as, being seduced by Jesuits,

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<sup>92</sup> William Whately, A Bride bush (London, 1619) Aughterson, 31.

<sup>93</sup> William Gouge, Of domestical duties (London, 1622) Aughterson, 91.

<sup>94</sup> Gouge, Aughterson 93.

Priests or Friars.”<sup>95</sup> Gouge did not simply require that wives submit to their husbands’ will, he believed that women’s active obedience was required, and that wives must subject their desire to their husbands’ desires. Finally, Gouge articulates a widely held belief that the household was analogous to the state, and ordered families signified an ordered nation.<sup>96</sup> Echoing Dod and Cleaver’s stated belief, “A household is as it were a little commonwealth,” Gouge and others saw the wife’s submission to her husband, and her clearly defined and contained roles and responsibilities as necessary for the domestic order of the state.<sup>97</sup> Legal opinion concurred. As Lambarde explained of the 1532 Statute of Treasons, a wife “oweth obedience” to her husband, and his relationship to her is a “civile sovereigntie.”<sup>98</sup> Cultural and legal representation both conflated the domestic household and the political state. Murderous wives were not merely disobedient to their husbands, they were treasonous to the state as well.

For many writers, however, mutual respect and affection was a necessary component to a wife’s continued fidelity and chastity, even while acknowledging the husband’s superior status. Alexander Niccholes based his arguments on the belief that a wife must be ensconced in and acquainted with, “good and chaste society, to busy and apply her mind and body in some domestic, convenient and profitable exercises, according to her education and calling,

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<sup>95</sup> Gouge, Aughterson 93-94.

<sup>96</sup> Gouge, Aughterson 149.

<sup>97</sup> Dod and Cleaver 13.

<sup>98</sup> Lambarde, 184.

for example to the frailty of that whole sex hath a powerful hand, as it shall induce either to good or evil.”<sup>99</sup> Leigh advocated a more companionate model of marriage than that espoused by official church doctrine. She urged men, “Marry with none except you love her, and be not changeable in your love; let nothing after you have made your choice, remove your love from her, for it is an ungodly and very foolish thing of a man to mislike his own choice.”<sup>100</sup> While church homily advised husbands not to beat their wives but to “admonish and holpen (her) with good counsel,” Leigh envisioned a relationship based on personal choice and characterized by mutual love and respect. Other writers also advocated for companionate love in marriages. Elizabeth Grymestone urged her son to “marry in thine own rank, and seek especially in it thy contentment and preferment.”<sup>101</sup> Niccholes, in 1615, wrote that husbands must give their wives “certain assurance and testimony of thy love that she may with hers again the more reciprocally equal thy affection. For true love hath no power to think much less act amiss.”<sup>102</sup> Implicit in these relationships is an understanding that husbands and wives may choose each other of their own accord, marrying for love and not necessarily as part of an arranged contract between families.

Thomas Adams’ view of marriage, arguably the most progressive, was based on a belief in the fundamental equality of men and women. He argued for a model of marriage

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander Niccholes, A discourse of marriage and wiving (London, 1615) 84.

<sup>100</sup> Leigh 47-48.

<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Grymestone, Miscelanea, meditations, memoratives (London, 1604) A3.

<sup>102</sup> Niccholes 85.



that called for mutual dependence and support. Adams believed that woman “was not made out of the earth, which was the matter of man, nor out of inferior creatures, which were the servants of man: but out of himself that she might be dear in estimation and equal in condition to him.”<sup>103</sup> Like Aemilia Lanyer, Adams does not construe women as more prone to moral weakness than men. As Lanyer does, Adams also reminds his readers that while Christ was a man he was chosen by God to be born of woman, “and was not begot of a man.”<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Adams asserts that the worst sin, Christ’s crucifixion, was committed by men: “woman had not a finger in it.”<sup>105</sup> Adam’s recognition of women as equal to men under the eyes of God may be a minority opinion amongst writers of his time; however, it challenges any notion that women were uniformly condemned by early modern society as inherently more prone to sin than men. The murder narratives as well, while focusing on sinful women and female wickedness, do not construe murderesses universally as representative of all daughters of Eve. While many authors, male and female, debated the sinful proclivities of women in general, the women in popular murder stories are uniquely wicked, and thus situated outside the community of all women.

The most widely published marriage treatises and handbooks argued for marriages based on hierarchical structure and advocated, if not romantic love, than a relationship lived

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<sup>103</sup> Thomas Adams, Meditations upon the creed (London, 1629), Aughterson, 29.

<sup>104</sup> Adams in Aughterson 30

<sup>105</sup> Adams in Aughterson 30.

“lawfully in a perpetual friendly fellowship to bring forth fruit.”<sup>106</sup> This belief, here quoted from the church’s Certain sermons or homilies, published first in 1547, and again under Elizabeth in 1562, was based on the premise that marriages were created for the practical needs of families and the procreation of children, rather than romantic love. Parental responsibility for the spiritual and moral education of children is a critical issue to many of the authors of marriage treatises. Ideally, according to some theologians, good mothers taught their children to embrace virtue and avoid sin, “that even from their cradles...they may drink godliness.”<sup>107</sup> Thomas Becon further argued that good mothers “with most sweet motherly exhortations, move them unto virtue, and stay them from vice, declaring unto them what a precious jewel virtue is in the sight of God, and contrariwise what a horrible monster sin is.”<sup>108</sup> Becon’s advice was written particularly for mothers and daughters, but Elizabeth Grymeston was similarly concerned for her son’s spiritual and moral welfare. In a treatise published posthumously in 1604, she wrote: “there is no mother can either more affectionately show her nature, or more naturally manifest her affection, than in advising her children out of her own experience to eschew evil and incline them to do what is good.”<sup>109</sup> Clearly articulated in Grymestone’s advice is belief in the power of a mother’s influence in instructing her children “out of her own experience.” Similarly, Elizabeth Jocelyn, writing in

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<sup>106</sup> An homily of the state of matrimony (London 1562) 255-6, Aughterson, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Becon, Aughterson 113.

<sup>108</sup> Becon, Aughterson 113.

<sup>109</sup> Grymestone A3.

1624, urged her unborn child, if a girl, to learn from other women's experiences: "follow the example of those religious women whose virtuous frames time hath not power to race out: as devout Anna who served the Lord with fasting and prayer...just Elizabeth, who served God without reproof...and the chaste Susanna, whose story, I hope, the strictest will allow for a worthy example."<sup>110</sup> The notion that a good mother taught her children primarily by demonstrating virtue herself is fundamental to most of the treatises on motherhood. While many debated the merits of breastfeeding or teaching girls to read and write, the majority of writers agree with Becon, who asserted "do not the children for the most part prove even such as the mothers are, of whom they come? Can the mothers bring up their children virtuously when they themselves be void of virtue?"<sup>111</sup> Early modern men and women generally believed that good mothers raised good children by their example. The wives and mothers of murder narratives clearly behave immorally. They are adulterous, and covet money, fine clothing, and jewels. They behave immodestly amongst their neighbors. In their characters and daily actions they exemplify the inverse of femininity described in marriage and motherhood treatises, and in so doing, they threaten the well-being of their children, and men and women throughout England.

Whether married for love or practicality, women did not escape suspicions about their morality simply because they were wives. Moralists and marriage treatise authors continuously express concerns for controlling women's chastity and sexuality even within

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<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Jocelyn, The mother's legacy to her unborn child (London, 1624) Aughterson, 185.

<sup>111</sup> Becon, Aughterson, 176.

the bounds of matrimony. In the play A Warning for Fair Women, Anne Saunders bemoans men who assume that married women unaccompanied in public are morally suspect. Marriage itself did not provide an unassailable cloak of social propriety, and wives could still be subject to accusations of moral profligacy.<sup>112</sup> Jonathan Dollimore argues that the oppositional relationship between housewife and whore “is itself a notoriously unstable one.”<sup>113</sup> If lust is the woman’s primary and ultimate sin, her confinement in marriage might regulate her lustfulness.<sup>114</sup> As the early modern marriage treatises reveal, however, there was considerable debate over how much authority husbands should exercise over their wives.

The murder narratives dramatize these tensions. In plays, pamphlets, and ballads, wives who murder are invariably adulterous, and mothers who murder are frequently sexually promiscuous. Infanticides in particular are presented as perpetrated by single women on their illegitimate offspring to avoid the shame of pregnancy, and continue in their sinful ways. Jane Hattersley and her lover Adamson repeatedly conceive and murder their illegitimate babies, “and they slept as securely for all this start, in their horrible uncleannesse as before. Still progest this most gracelesse, audacious and impudent beast, (too bad to beare the good name of woman) in this sinne with all impudencie.”<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Frauncis uses witchcraft to enchant and murder her lover Andrew, as well as abort the infant they

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<sup>112</sup> Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 15; Jonathan Dollimore, Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 137-140; Woodbridge, Women, 180-181.

<sup>113</sup> Dollimore, 140.

<sup>114</sup> Dollimore, 137; Ruth Karras, “The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England,” Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society 14 (1989), 399-433.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas Brewer, The Bloudy Mother, (London, 1609) B3.

illegitimately conceived.<sup>116</sup> Popular literature and drama construct female murderers as fully immersed in sin. This sin, moreover, is defined in particularly feminine ways also described in the treatises on the nature of women, marriage, and motherhood. Women who kill their husbands, family members, servants, and children contain and embody multi-faceted aspects of sin. They are sexually promiscuous, greedy, covetous, and vain as sinful women were constructed contemporaneously. They pursue earthly pleasures of lust and material wealth, and their desires, uncontrolled, lead to disaster for their families and themselves. Thus murderous women in the cultural imaginations of authors, and perhaps their audiences, are women who transgress completely all the dictates that define virtuous women, while demonstrating all the characteristics of sinful ones. Murderous women, the epitome of bad wives and mothers, are evil ne plus ultra.

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<sup>116</sup> Unknown, The Examination and Confession of certaine Wytches (London, 1566) A8.

## CHAPTER FOUR: MURDER NARRATIVES IN PAMPHLETS, BALLADS AND DRAMA

### An Overview

Newes From Perin in Cornwall begins optimistically: “At Perin, a Towne in Cornwall, liv’d a man of honest life and ample possessions.”<sup>117</sup> The fairytale was the “first tutor of mankind,” according to Walter Benjamin, and in this sense, murder narratives not only sound but also relate like fairytales. As in fairytales, murder stories show, in Benjamin’s words, “how fearfully the world can darken...and with what majesty evil can raise its scepter.”<sup>118</sup> This murder pamphlet, in its title and its opening sentence, encapsulates the dichotomy of so many murder pamphlets; they proclaim themselves to be true reportages of actual events in real towns while they employ the language and mythology of the fairy tale. Moreover, like fairytale villains, murder stories have wicked witches and evil stepmothers. These murderesses exemplify villainy, and are positioned as forces of evil acting against communities and other characters. In ordinary towns, amidst ordinary lives, murderous wives kill their husbands, mothers kill their children, and mistresses murder their servants. These narratives relate forbidden love, religious passion, cruel gossip, sex, and violence. They tell of desperate or depraved women who cause the shocking graphic deaths

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<sup>117</sup> Unknown, Newes From Perin in Cornwall: of a most Bloody and unexampled Murther (London, 1618) A3.

<sup>118</sup> Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 102-106.

of friends and loved ones and in doing so locate the murderess at the center of the story. With the murderer as protagonist, the violence she inflicts is situated around her, literally against the intimate people in her life, and physically in the rooms she herself lives in: bedrooms, solars, and kitchens. Murder texts are domestic tragedies of yeomen, merchants, maids, and wet nurses, and their intimate encounters with terrible evil. It should come as no surprise for readers that at the ending of Newes From Perin, the man will be ruined, bereft of all his possessions and his only son, because of the greedy homicidal designs of his second young wife. As fairytales these are stories that explain the darkness of a woman's sin, the depths of hate, the providence of God; they return order to chaos and give meaning to the inexplicable cruelties humans inflict on each other.

“Ay me vile wretch that ever I was borne,” mourns Mistress Arden in the ballad of her murder tale.<sup>119</sup> As a ballad, her story begins, not as a fairy tale, but mournfully as a lament. In these first few words we come to understand that Mistress Arden is the author of her misfortune. In ballads, the speaker usually insists on an audience, as George Barnwell cries,

All youths of fair England,  
That dwell both far and neer,  
Regard my story that I tell,  
And to my song give ear.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Unknown, The Complaint and Lamentation of Mistress Arden (London, n.d.).

<sup>120</sup> Unknown, An Excellent Ballad of George Barnwel (London, n.d.) 1-4.

Seduced by a harlot, George himself tells us his story. But because this is a ballad, George is not the only storyteller present; his audience can sing his story too. Conversely, Anne Wallen's ballad is first addressed to God:

Great God that sees al things that here are don  
Keeping thy Court with thy celestiall Son  
Heere her complaint that hath so sore offended  
Forgive my fact before my life is ended.<sup>121</sup>

Cleverly, every time this ballad is sung, a prayer is made on behalf of a woman who has murdered her husband. At the outset, Anne is positioned in the third person, and these first lines place this sinner before an audience, her stage a scaffold. Then the song shifts, the speaker sings in the first person, and Anne is suddenly situated in the bodies and voices of her audience. Anne, like Mistress Arden, is lamenting her sin, repenting her crime, and begging us to "take heed" of her story. Or, as her voices, we singers beg each other to take heed of our story. In this way, murder ballads locate the sin, not just in towns and households, but in the lives of listeners, and in the bodies of singers. The psychological space of the murderer is shared by anyone who can hear or join in. Natascha Wurzbach argues that direct addresses to listeners relate to the performative nature of street ballads recited and sold in towns and villages across England.<sup>122</sup> Direct addresses and appeals for

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<sup>121</sup> Unknown, *Anne Wallens Lamentation* (London, 1616) *English Broadside Ballad Archive*, ed. Patricia Fumerton 2006, U of California at Santa Barbara, 11 March 2009  
[http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/Pepys1/facs\\_trans/L/Pepys\\_facs\\_1\\_0124-0125\\_L.jpg](http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/Pepys1/facs_trans/L/Pepys_facs_1_0124-0125_L.jpg).

<sup>122</sup> Wurzbach 39-10.



mercy or pity were also voiced on stage, and some of the plays performed were based on the same crimes written in pamphlets and broadsides. Plays allowed audiences to witness murder first-hand, watching killers in costume and on stage hold bloody daggers as they attack men, women, and children. Andrew Gurr suggests theater in the play houses may have been “by far the most substantial form of social intercommunication available, the only kind of popular journalism and the only occasion when large numbers of people gathered together, except for sermons and executions. It was certainly not cast in a minor role.”<sup>123</sup> Murder stories lure readers and audiences into tales of horror and degradation and acquaint them metaphysically with the feminine embodiment of evil.

Murder narratives also claim to tell true stories of real crimes. Anne Brewen’s story is entitled The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering of John Brewen, Goldsmith of London, while Elizabeth Caldwell’s narrative is A True Discourse Of the practices of Elizabeth Caldwell. Plays occasionally participate in this style of presentation as well; the title of the play about the murder of Master Arden reads, The Lamentable and True Tragedie of M. Arden of Feversham in Kent, and the play, A Warning for Faire Women, is subtitled The most tragicall and lamentable murther of Master George Sanders of London, Marchant, nigh Shooters hill. In this case, both stories were in fact based on true crimes, and are simultaneously told in pamphlet and ballad form as well. Even stories that do not insist on their veracity in the title often include references to trials, arraignments, and specific dates, as well as named villages and counties. Elizabeth James murdered her maid in a pamphlet titled

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<sup>123</sup> Andrew Gurr, Playgoing in Shakespearean England, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 142.

Three Bloodie Murders, which summarizes her story on the title page, declaring, “The Second, committed by Elizabeth James, on the body of her Mayde, in the Parish of Egham in Surrie: who was condemned for the same fact at Saint Margaret’s hill in Southwark, the 2 of July 1613, and lieth in the White Lion till her deliverie.”<sup>124</sup> Deeds Against Nature and Monsters by kinde states on its title page, “Tried at the Gaole deliverie of Newgate, at the Sessions in the Old Bayly, the 18. And 19. Of July last, 1614...(and) executed at Tyburne the 21. Of July following.”<sup>125</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede’s narrative doesn’t bother with dramatic titles, it simply states “The Araigement and burning of Margaret Ferne-seede, for the Murther of her late Husband Anthony Ferne-seede, found deade in Peckham Field neere Lambeth, having once before attempted to poison him with broth, being executed in S. Georges-field the last of Februarie, 1608.” Furthermore, authors of these narratives frequently add details in the form of editorial asides that insist on the truthfulness of the story. Gilbert Dugdale’s pamphlet of Elizabeth Caldwell features a dedicatory epistle that asserts,

True it is that divers reports passed up and downe the streets of London as touching this act of murder, at how scandalously, as five mured. Three mured by the meanes of six persons, which your Worships know is false...Therefore being an eare-

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<sup>124</sup> Unknown, Three Bloodie Murders (London, 1613).

<sup>125</sup> Unknown, Deeds Against Nature, and Monsters by kinde (London, 1614).

witness to this false alarm, it made me more diligent in the setting forth the truth....<sup>126</sup>

The author of A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers bemoans the general immorality of the day and states, “And that I may not wade into abundance of matter, without due prooffe to affirme anythinge alleadged: I praye you look into these Tragicall accidents following.”<sup>127</sup> The truthfulness of the story is often emphasized in order to provide greater urgency to what the author sees as a society in moral decline: “If wee but looke into the present occasions offered unto us, and mark how busie the devil is to work ma(n)s utter overthrow: the rather by a grievous and horrible mischances which hath lately happened, wherein may be seene, how needefull it for us to call for the grace of our heavenly father.”<sup>128</sup>

At the conclusion of The Lamentable and True Tragedie of M. Arden, Arden’s friend Francklin voices the epilogue stating,

Thus have you seene the trueth of Ardens death...  
Gentlemen we hope youle pardon this naked Tragedy,  
Wherein no filed points are foisted in,  
To make it gracious to the eare or eye.  
For simple trueth is gracious enough;

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<sup>126</sup> Gilbert Dugdale, A True Discourse Of the practices of Elizabeth Caldwell (London, 1603).

<sup>127</sup> Unknown, A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers (London, 1583) A3,

<sup>128</sup> A Briefe Discourse A4.

And needes no other points of glossing stuffe.<sup>129</sup>

These murder texts are invested in locating their stories at specific places in the contemporary times of their readers. Even Arden's death, occurring forty years before publication, is presented as an immediate local event. The truth of these stories is intertwined with contemporaneity. They warn of immediate and ever present dangers lurking in real houses and towns all over England.

Witchcraft pamphlets, in which women murder through sorcery and enchantment, similarly participate in authorial claims of truthfulness, and invariably take the form of transcripts of examinations and trials of accused witches. Their titles emphasize the role justices of the peace, magistrates, and judges play, as well as the legal processes involved in discovering and convicting witches. Despite their resemblance to, and apparent quoting of assize and sessions trial records, however, witch pamphlets' adherence to a formulaic storyline, literary structure, and language suggest a body of literature that is consciously crafted for the enjoyment of a reading and listening public. Marion Gibson's detailed literary examination of witchcraft pamphlets in this time period argues, "It is tempting to see the accounts collected here as windows on the world of witchcraft. But the pamphlets were written deliberately to create that impression. Produced for a variety of readers, the texts display witchcraft as a coherent and explicable body of practices."<sup>130</sup> These stories enable readers and listeners to identify the kinds of women who practice witchcraft. The murders

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<sup>129</sup> Unknown, The Lamentable and True Tragedie of M. Arden (London, 1592) K2.

<sup>130</sup> Marion Gibson, Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing, (London: Routledge, 2000) 2-3.

witches commit are further rendered concretely as intelligible and elucidative acts. Murder and witchcraft pamphlets cultivate a sense of realism to add to the dramatic effect of their stories, and to locate these crimes in a social narrative that renders them both fantastic but also ultimately explicable.

That claims to veracity must be regarded with measured skepticism is evident in titles of romances and other stories also published in ballad and pamphlet form, including A True Tale of Robin Hood, The Lamenting Lady, who...had as many children at one birth as there are daies in the yeare...as many English men now living in London, can truly testifie the same and hath seene it, or Joseph Swetnam's notorious The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women, written under the pseudonym Thomas Tel-troth.<sup>131</sup> Even early modern readers must not have believed everything they read. Shakespeare's play The Winter's Tale, however, pokes fun both at the number of ballads claiming to be true, and the willingness of readers to believe what they read when the shepherdess Mopsa declares, "I love a ballad in print alive, for then we are sure they are true."<sup>132</sup> Autolycus, the ballad seller, vouches for the truth of his ballads' outlandish stories saying, "Here's the midwife's name to't, one Mistress Taleporter, and five or six honest wives that were present. Why should I carry lies abroad?" He adds, "Five justices' hands at it, and witnesses more than my pack will

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<sup>131</sup> Martin Parker, A True Tale of Robin Hood (London, 1632); Unknown, The Lamenting Lady (London, 1620) Rollins Garland 121-131.

<sup>132</sup> William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale 4.4.259-260.

hold.”<sup>133</sup> Thomas Nashe, articulating a noticeably elitist point of view, dismisses the “true story” broadsides:

Hence come our babbling Ballets, and our new found Songs and Sonets,  
which every rednose Fidler hath at his fingers end, and every ignorant  
ale knight will breath foorth over the potte, as soone as his braine waxeth  
hote. Be it a truth which they would tune, they enterlace it with a lye or two  
to make meter, not regarding veritie, so they may make uppe the verse.<sup>134</sup>

While the ignorant country folk, like Mopsa, might believe everything they see and hear in print, some contemporary writers, and possibly their readers, held a more skeptical view of popular print. Why would authors, publishers, and audiences accept and continue to practice a literary contrivance of embellished truth or outright fabrication?

One explanation, as Natascha Wurzbach argues in her history of street ballads, is that crime stories may have “offered not so much truths propagated by scholarly tradition, but instruction in the ways of the world, to be gleaned from events which are contemporary, either because of their actual core of reality or because of the fiction adopted.”<sup>135</sup> Authorial notes claiming to describe real events in a truthful manner, and texts that specify the dates of the murderer’s arrest, trial, conviction, imprisonment, and execution may make reference to the actual dates of real crime stories, but they also consciously evoke a dangerous world

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<sup>133</sup> Shakespeare, Winter 4.4.268-270.

<sup>134</sup> Thomas Nashe, The Anatomie of Absurditie (London, 1589) Biv.

<sup>135</sup> Wurzbach 52.

where adultery, sorcery, and murder happen in towns down the road, or next door, to ordinary people living otherwise ordinary lives similar to those of their readers.

Katherine Craik's analysis of historical writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth century sheds light on why this literature's insistence on the truth of their stories could have been an effective commercial ploy for making sales. She argues that contemporary authors, such as Richard Braithwait, Philip Sidney, Robert Barret, and William Cornwallis, believed in "history's fortificatory effects on men's minds, bodies, and spirits," and quoted Plutarch, Livy, and Seneca, praising "the facility of histories to whet men's moral indignation, and, especially, to kindle feelings of righteous fury."<sup>136</sup> While the focus of her work centers on writing by and for elite classes, Craik's argument establishes a precedent asserting an accepted belief in literature's physical and psychological effects on readers. If elite writers believed that histories could have a moralizing effect, while condemning popular literature as ephemeral at best and morally corrupting at worst, presenting stories of witchcraft, adultery, and murder as true histories of recent events could be a calculated attempt by authors and publishers to characterize pamphlets and ballads as histories and thus, morally beneficial.

Additionally, Joy Wiltenburg's analysis of sensationalism in crime pamphlets argues that literary truth was not necessarily the goal of crime and news pamphlets. Authors frequently saw evidence of God's truth or moral truths in fantastic events and shocking crimes: "disbelief made people ignore signs of God's punishment."<sup>137</sup> Criminal literature

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<sup>136</sup> Katharine A. Craik, Reading Sensations in Early Modern England (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2007) 67.

<sup>137</sup> Joy Wiltenburg, "True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism," The American Historical Review 109.5 (2004):1-26, 5.

offered readers clear moral lessons on avoiding temptation and sin, and served as guidebooks for identifying and ridding the community of dangerous threats. Murder stories are cautionary tales that explicate crime and contain it, and as Cornwallis suggests, they were irresistible to many consumers.

Murders in pamphlets were horrific affairs, violent, bloody, and graphic assaults perpetrated on some of the most intimate people in women's lives. As Peter Lake, in "Deeds Against Nature: Cheap Print, Protestantism and Murder in Early Seventeenth-Century England" writes, "here surely, is the literary equivalent of a John Carpenter film."<sup>138</sup> The murders are presented in literary slow motion, and readers don't simply have front row seats, they are in homicidal mother's laps, standing over victim's beds, and even staring the murderer in the face. At times too the author lingers over the murder and relays the scene with progressively more explicit imagery. Margaret Vincent, in killing the first of her children,

regarding neither the pretty smiles it made, nor the dandling before the mother's face, 'nor anything it could do, but like a fierce and bloody Medea, she took it violently by the throat and with a Garter taken from her leg, making thereof a noose and putting the same about her child's sweet neck, she in a wrathful manner drew the same so close together that in a moment she parted the soul and body.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Lake 259.

<sup>139</sup> Unknown, A pittilesse mother (London, 1616) A4.



This is a picture of pure innocence starkly contrasted with awful cruelty and evil, but even when the victim is an adult, his mortal agony is terrible to read. Victims are brutalized and their suffering compels horror and pity. Master Page's death is gruesome and protracted:

Mr. Padge being not a sleep as is aforesaid, asked who came in whereupon Priddis leapt upon his maister being in his bed, who roused himself and got out upon his feete, it had been hard enough for his man, but that Stone flew upon him being naked, and suddenlie tripped him, so that he fell to the ground. Whereupon both of them fell upon him and took the kercher from his head, and knitting the same about his neck they immediately stifled him. And as it appeareth even in an anguish of death, the said M. Padge greatly laboured to pull the kercher from about his neck, by reason of the marks and scratches which he had made with his nailes upon his throat, but there he could not prevaile, for they would not let slip their hold until he was full dead.<sup>140</sup>

In fact, Master's Page's life is threatened twice in this pamphlet, and readers are thus treated to two agonizing death scenes. In detailed descriptions and skillfully suspended drama, the audience is encouraged to linger over and even participate in horrific violence.

Ballads too can be graphic and direct, as when Sara Milwood persuades her lover to kill his uncle, and "he struck his Uncle down, / And beat his brains out of his head;/ so sore he cracked his crown."<sup>141</sup> The complaint and lamentation of Mistresse Arden of Faversham

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<sup>140</sup> Anthony Munday, Sundry strange and inhumaine Murthers (London, 1591) B3.

<sup>141</sup> George Barnwell 375-377.

details the murder's violence and the murderers' cold blooded actions to readers and listeners in the first person:

And as they plaid the word was straightway spoke,  
Blacke-will and Shakebag out the corner broke,  
And with a Towell backwards pul'd him downe  
Which made me think they now my joyes did crowne  
With swords and knives they stab'd him to the heart  
Mosby and I did likewise act our part.<sup>142</sup>

Anne Wallens kills her husband with particularly violent force in the middle of a fight:

Then presently one of his tooles I got.  
And on his body gave a wicked stroake.  
Amongst his intrailes I this Chissell threw.  
Where as his Caule came out, for which I rue.<sup>143</sup>

Reading or listening to these pamphlets and ballads allowed sixteenth-century readers to experience the crime vicariously with all its drama, intrigue, blood, gore and horror. These texts provided a colorful and vivid route from day to day lives dictated by the social strictures of neighborly and domestic responsibilities into the depths of a woman's sin.

The descriptive quality of violence that lures readers into the story is also enhanced by frequent direct addresses to the audience. Both make readers and listeners eyewitnesses

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<sup>142</sup> Unknown, The complaint and lamentation of Mistresse Arden of Feversham (London, n.d.) 157-162.

<sup>143</sup> Anne Wallens 55-58.

to and participants in the crime itself, as when Ales Arden rejoices at the height of her husband's attack. In the middle of strangulation or disemboweling, the authors pause to remind us of just how horrible all of this is. In The Most Cruel and Bloody Murder, published in 1606, a female member of a band of thieves proudly displays her lack of mercy:

talkest thou of pity, quoth she if thy eyes have yet left so much sight to be witness  
how I'll be pitiful? Behold how I'll perform thy petition. So drawing out her knife  
(O act too terrible to report, but the most damnablest that ever was heard of, executed  
by a woman) she ripped her up the belly, making herself a tragical midwife, or truly a  
murderess, that brought an abortive babe to the world and murdered the mother.<sup>144</sup>

At times, authorial asides deliberately attempt to heighten and prolong the emotional immediacy of the moment, such as when Margaret Vincent's narrator exclaims, "This Creature not deserving Mother's name...not yet glutted nor sufficed with these few drops of Innocent blood (nay, her own deare blood bred in her own body, cherished in her own womb with much dearness full forty weeks), not satisfied I say, with this one murder but she would headlong run unto a second."<sup>145</sup> Finally, addressing the audience allows authors to ventriloquize their murderers, and have them claim sole responsibility for the horrors they rain down upon their friends, servants, and loved ones.

Pamphlets' lurid descriptions of violence provided audiences with an opportunity to experience fantastic extremes of behavior that were far out of their realms of everyday

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<sup>144</sup> Unknown, The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther (London, 1606) A4.

<sup>145</sup> Pittilesse A4.

existence. So detailed and dramatic were some pamphlets that J.A. Sharpe, in Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750, argues that by 1700 it was thought that accounts of crime might even encourage participation in the real thing.<sup>146</sup> Craik argues that emotions cultivated by encountering words and texts, such as “sadness, love, courage and compassion contributed in important ways to early modern systems of ethics, morals and religious belief.”<sup>147</sup> Craik asserts that emotions aroused by reading were ideally believed to provide men and women the ability to “assess the state of one another’s physical, moral and spiritual health and to estimate their position in civil society.”<sup>148</sup> While Craik primarily focuses on elite and morally instructive texts, she also includes an examination on the effects of pornography in popular print in the middle of the seventeenth century. According to Craik, writers believed in the effects of reading on the physical body and the moral mind. Citing a “dynamic reciprocity” between texts and readers that was believed to encourage virtuous thought and action, or seduce the impressionable into sin, Craik states, “Reading affects the integrity of men’s bodies, and, in turn, their relationships with one another and with God.”<sup>149</sup> Moreover, some of the authors concerned with literature’s effects on virtue and behavior themselves wrote crime pamphlets and ballads including, Anthony Munday, Thomas

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<sup>146</sup> J. A. Sharpe, Crime in Early Modern England (Essex: Longman Press, 1984), 160.

<sup>147</sup> Craik 13.

<sup>148</sup> Craik 13.

<sup>149</sup> Craik 12.

Deloney, and Gilbert Dugdale.<sup>150</sup> John Milton's defense of literary freedom in print argues the benefits of encountering sin in books. As the author of Paradise Lost, his Satan, ostensibly evil personified, is nonetheless charismatic and persuasive. Milton's epic, like murder narratives, presents characters confronted with dangerous temptations and desires. Milton asserted, however,

herein the difference is of bad books, that they to a discreet and judicious Reader serve in many respects to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate...As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without the knowledge of evil...I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary...Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason?<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Clark, Women 15; Craik, 59; Raymond 58-59. Raymond argues that most pamphlet authors were from the middling, literate classes, many educated as clergymen, and wrote with strong class sensibilities, infusing their writing with an urban consciousness, and which fostered pamphlet forms that "were market-oriented, and written and read with facility."

<sup>151</sup> John Milton, Areopagitica, ed. Thomas H. Luxon, 2002, The Milton Reading Room, Dartmouth College, 10 May 2009 [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/aeropagitica/index.shtml](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/aeropagitica/index.shtml).

As moralistic stories or sensationalized urban legends, play, pamphlet, and ballad authors employed literary means to encourage an intimate identification with the murderess's crime, not simply to sell texts, but to acquaint readers with a personal knowledge of evil.

### Lust and Murder: Traitorous Wives

Thomas Beast's wife commences an affair with her husband's handsome young servant, Christopher, to whom

The good Wife of y house used far better affection, then to her owne Husband.

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, and preferred the fleshly dealings of her new companion so much, as she must needs seeke and practise the death of her Husband.<sup>152</sup>

When wives murder their husbands, the precipitating factor, according to popular literature, is a passionate adulterous love affair. In Mistress Beast's case, her behavior with Christopher becomes the subject of neighborly speculation, "so aparant were their gestures, so publick their meetings, and so familiar their speeches and outward behaviours."<sup>153</sup> Anne Brewen's desire for Parker leads her to conceive their illegitimate child while refusing to share her husband's bed, before she decides to commit murder.<sup>154</sup> Mistress Turner confesses, "Lust

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<sup>152</sup> A Briefe Discourse B3.

<sup>153</sup> A Briefe Discourse A4.

<sup>154</sup> Thomas Kyd, The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering of John Brewen (London, 1592).

often lay within my widowed sheetes, / and taught me how to tast unbidden sweetes, / And that toward hell I might go one step furder/ The last and worst I went into was murder.”<sup>155</sup>

Both Ulalia Page and Elizabeth Caldwell take lovers before they agree to murder their husbands. No sooner than consummating an affair, most wives and lovers, like Ulalia and Strangwidge, find “the divell so wrought in the harts of them both, that they practiced daye and night how to bring her husband to his end.”<sup>156</sup> Elizabeth Caldwell is a reluctant sinner who must be persuaded first to cheat on a husband who has abandoned her, and then agree to his death. Even Elizabeth finds, however, that no sooner has she given in to the ardent and persistent Jeffrey Bownd, “his insatiable desire could not bee so satisfied, but perswaded her of himselfe...to yeelde her consent by some meanes to murder her sayd husband.”<sup>157</sup> Like Elizabeth, Anne Sanders must also be persuaded to commit adultery. Her confession, in the pamphlet version of her story, links her sexual transgression with her husband’s death:

I had a good husband by whom I had manie children, with whom I lived in wealth and might have done stil, had not the devil kindled in my hearte, first the hellish firebrand of unlawfull lust, and afterward a murtherous intent to procure my saide husbände to be bereved of his life<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Unknown, “Mistress Turners Tears,” The just Downefall of Ambition, Adultery Murder (London, 1615) C4.

<sup>156</sup> Munday, Sundry B3.

<sup>157</sup> Dugdale, True Discourse B.

<sup>158</sup> Unknown, A briefe discourse of the late murther of master George Saunders (London, 1573) D3.

As Frances Dolan observed, “adulterous desire leads inevitably to murder.”<sup>159</sup> According to pamphlets and ballads, murderous wives are first unfaithful wives.

Plays in particular demonstrate the intertwined quality of adultery and murder as characters verbalize their thoughts and emotions to the audience. Moreover, in plays, audiences are immediate witnesses to love, betrayal, and murder as they watch killers with poison or daggers menace husbands, lovers, and rivals before their eyes. Additionally, some of the plays performed in this period reframed and re-presented true stories of murderous women that were based on the same crimes detailed in pamphlets and broadsides. Like sermons and executions, plays sometimes assume an overtly didactic role. Often, like their popular print counterparts, they plumb the depths of sin hidden in seemingly ordinary women. In A Warning For Fair Women, Tragedy narrates a masque listing the sins accumulated by the murderous wife, her lover, and their wicked conspirators:

Here is the Maske unto this damned murther  
The Furies first, the divell leades the daunce  
Next, lawlesse Lust conducteth cruell Browne  
He doth seduce this poore deluded soule  
Attended by unspotted Innocence  
As yet unguiltie of her husbands death...  
Here they prepare them to these lustful feasts,  
And here they sitte all wicked murthers guests.

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<sup>159</sup> Dolan 40.



Thus sinne prevailes, she drinkes the poysoned draught,  
With which base thoughts henceforth infects her soule,  
And wins her free consent to this foule deed,  
Now bloud and Lust doth conquer and subdue  
And Chastitie is quite abandoned:  
Here enters Murther into al their hearts,  
And doth possesse them with the hellish thirste.<sup>160</sup>

In The Lamentable And True Tragedie of M. Arden of Feversham, Ales Arden believes her husband's existence thwarts her romance with Mosbie. For Ales, her desire for Mosbie exists in tandem with her desire for her husband's death:

Oh that same ayrie spirit,  
Would in the shape and likenesse of a horse  
Gallope with Arden crosse the Ocean,  
And throw him from his backe into the waves.  
Sweete Mosbie is the man that hath my hart:  
And he usurpes it, having nought but this,  
That I am tyed to him by marriage.<sup>161</sup>

Later Ales again couples her love for Mosbie with her wish for Arden's death stating,

And Mosbie, thou that comes to me by stelth

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<sup>160</sup> Unknown, A Warning for Faire Women, (London, 1599) D-D2.

<sup>161</sup> The Lamentable and True Tragedie A3.

Shalt neither feare the biting speech of men,  
Nor Ardens lookes, as surely shall he die,  
As I abhor him, and love only thee.<sup>162</sup>

Ales cannot separate these two mutual desires of lust and murder. While in A Warning For Fair Women, the masque portrays Lust escorting the lead characters to a feast hosted by Murder. In both plays the link between adultery and murder is the driving force of the plot.

In addition, Thomas Middleton's play, The Changeling, presents murder as an inevitable outcome of unhappy marriage and couplings based on lust. Beatrice, affianced to Alonzo Piracquo, secretly desires Alsemero. She hires her father's servant Deflores to murder Alonzo. Beatrice's sexual transgressions, however, become more problematic for her than the murder, when Deflores demands to sleep with her as payment for killing Alonzo. Furthermore, in a desperate effort to maintain a façade of virginity and innocence for her new husband Alsemero, Beatrice learns how to outsmart a virgin test, hires her servant Diaphanta as substitute for her on the wedding night, and ultimately consents to the woman's murder. Initially, Beatrice's lust for Alsemero is presented simultaneously with her dislike of her contracted fiancé:

How happy were this meeting, this embrace,  
If it were free from envy! This poor kiss,  
It has an enemy, a hateful one,  
That wishes poison to't. How well were I now

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<sup>162</sup> The Lamentable and True Tragedie A4.

If there was none such name known as Piracquo.<sup>163</sup>

Further linking lust with murder, Beatrice-Joanna is compelled to pay Deflores for his murder of Alonzo with her virginity. Beatrice-Joanna's murderous intentions are intimately intertwined with her sexual immorality, a point underscored by her subsequent feelings for the wicked Deflores. Although she initially loathes Deflores, their shared guilt in Alsemero's death ultimately ties them together. Beatrice-Joanna comes to appreciate his dedication and willingness to act on her behalf. While she must hide her loss of virginity from her new husband, Deflores knows the measure of her sins, and continues to remain devoted. His passion for her prompts her to respond:

I'm forced to love thee now,

'Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour<sup>164</sup>

Ironically, in the protection of her tarnished honor, Deflores earns Beatrice-Joanna's adulterous love and bed. As a pair they embody the sins the play presents: the de-flowerer and the murderer. The play's title reminds us of the interchangeability of murder and lust when, at the play's end, it is Beatrice-Joanna who is now also responsible for a woman's deflowering, while both she and Deflores have committed a second murder.

Murderesses in pamphlets and ballads are more straightforward in their wickedness than those in the plays. Margaret Ferne-seede is dedicated to a life of

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<sup>163</sup> Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, The Changeling, (London, 1622), N.W. Bawcutt ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) II.ii.15-21

<sup>164</sup> The Changeling, V.i.48.

loosenesse and lewdnesse...which either unlawfull lust, or abhominable prostitution could violently cast upon her with the greatest infamie, yea, and with such a publique and unrespective unchastitie, that neither being chaste nor caute, she regarded not either into what ease the loathsomnesse of her life was sounded or into what bed of lust her lasviiious bodie was transported.<sup>165</sup>

Anne Sanders, by contrast, is an unassuming, beautiful wife described by her friend as the ideal Elizabethan matron, “very honest, very chaste...wise, and vertuous.”<sup>166</sup> Before commencing her affaire with Browne, Anne acts the part of doting wife and mother. Anne’s role as mistress of her household calls for close daily interaction with her children, and, in one sweet scene, mother and son display an easy intimacy with each other.<sup>167</sup> Anne seems to exemplify Gouge’s typical modern housewife, keeping close eye on her children and foodstuffs. Her honesty is clearly established as well. In her first encounter with Browne, he watches her undetected noting,

Yonder she sits to light this obscure street  
Like a bright diamond worne in some darke place...  
But so demure, so modest are her looks  
So chaste her eies, so vertuous her aspect

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<sup>165</sup> Unknown, The Araignment and burning of Margaret Ferne-seede (London, 1608) A3-4.

<sup>166</sup> A Warning B2.

<sup>167</sup> A Warning B3.

As do repulse loves false Artilerie.<sup>168</sup>

Anne deflects Browne's attempts to engage her in conversation, insisting on interpreting his presence at her house as a business call for her husband. Unlike that of Margaret Ferne-seede, Anne's behavior prior to her affair with George Browne exemplifies that of a virtuous wife and mother.

Margaret Ferne-seede is not the only pamphlet murderess whose villainous character is established early in her story. Anne Welles, at first described as "comely," of "good behaviour," and a "nice maiden," is quickly shown to be entertaining two suitors at once, one out of love, and the other because he showers her with "golde and jewels."<sup>169</sup> Thomas Beast's wife, who is never named in the story, is introduced as "the good Wife of y house (who) used far better affection (to her lover), then to her owne Husband."<sup>170</sup> During the course of the narrative, the author refers to her as a "filthie desirous Woman," "harlot," and "Oh most horrible and wicked Woman, a woman, nay a devill."<sup>171</sup> Mrs. Beast's sole identity is marked and articulated as a sinful woman. Even the pamphlet account of Anne Sanders' murder of her husband, here identified as George Saunders, portrays Anne in a far less flattering light than her character's description in the play. Here Anne seems to attract men who "love her excessively," and is practiced at deception:

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<sup>168</sup> A Warning B3.

<sup>169</sup> The Trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering A2.

<sup>170</sup> A Briefe Discourse B3.

<sup>171</sup> A Briefe Discourse B3.

And mistresse Saunders...stoode so stoutly stil to the denial of all things, (in which denial she continued also a certayne tyme after hir condemnation) that some were brought in a blinde belief, that either she was not gilty at al, or else had but brought hir selfe in danger of lawe through ignorance, and not through pretended malice.<sup>172</sup>

Moreover, the pamphlet implies that Anne might be guilty of greed as well as lust. When Master Sanders account book, “the knowledge of his whole state,” is known to be missing, the executions of the murderers are delayed until the justices can elicit further confessions.<sup>173</sup> Finally, Anne’s constant denial of guilt and her relationship with the minister Mell describe a woman of active dishonesty and immorality, contrasted with the passive Anne of the play, whose guilt is described by the narrator as only one finger dipped in her husband’s blood.<sup>174</sup> Finally, most of the wives in pamphlets go to their deaths unrepentant. Ulalia Page, in the pamphlet story of her crime, does not deny her guilt but insists “she had rather dye with Strangwidge, then to live with Padge.”<sup>175</sup> Even after her arrest, Margaret Ferne-seede, “thinking to out face truth with boldnesse, and sin with impudenes,” is troublesome in prison, and “was sildome found to bee in charitie with any of her fellow prisoners, nor at any time in

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<sup>172</sup> George Saunders B2.

<sup>173</sup> George Saunders B3.

<sup>174</sup> A Warning D2.

<sup>175</sup> Munday, Sundrye B4.

quiet with her selfe.”<sup>176</sup> While Margaret admits to extortion, receiving and selling stolen goods, blackmail, and being a bawd and prostitute, she refuses to confess to or repent her husband’s murder. The narrator condemns her stating, “But who knows not that in evill, there is a like impudence to deny, as there is a forwardnesse to acte: in which we will leave her whom the law hath found guilty.”<sup>177</sup> Murderous wives in most of the pamphlets are presented as wickedly disposed, and full of lust, greed, and pride.

In ballads, however, murderesses, while full of sin, are also presented as repentant, even at the beginning of their stories. The murderous wife narrates, introducing herself and beginning with her lamentation. These women rue their mistakes, and often also berate seductive lovers or thoughtless parents. While their guilt is clearly established, and the violence they commit graphically described, their regret and sorrow mitigate their villainy and help to establish a sense of empathy. Mistress Arden’s ballad opens with a particular poignancy: “Ay me, vile wretch that ever was borne, / Making my selfe unto the world a scorne:/ And to my friends and kindred all a shame, / Blotting their blood by my unhappy name.”<sup>178</sup> Mistress Page’s ballad blames her parents for forcing her into an unhappy marriage. While she admits guilt for consenting to her husband’s murder, and regrets her unloving behavior as a wife, she also holds her parents responsible, and positions herself as a sinner abandoned by society and God:

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<sup>176</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B.

<sup>177</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B3-4.

<sup>178</sup> The Complaint and lamentation of Mistresse Arden.

Eternal God forgive my fathers deed,  
And grant all Maidens may take better heed,  
If I had been but constant to my friend,  
I had not matcht to make so bad an end...  
Farewel false world and friend that fickle be,  
All wives farwel, example take by mie,  
Let not the Devil to murder you intice,  
Seek to escape such foul and filthy vice.

Anne Wallens is the only murderous wife in any of the texts who does not indulge in an adulterous affair. She kills her husband in a fit of anger. Her ballad, nonetheless, presents her guilt and subsequent regret in the same fashion as Mistress Arden and Ulalia Page.

Anne, like the other wives in these ballads, expresses shame and remorse lamenting, “Ah me the shame unto all women kinde, / To harbour such a thought within my minde;/ That now hath made me to the world a scorne, / And makes me curse the time that I was borne.”<sup>179</sup>

While these women admit to sin, their confessions are heavy with remorse. The ballads do not revel in murder; they articulate profound regret and sorrow. Murderous wives who narrate their ballads are guilty but also pathetic.

Catherine Belsey’s analysis of Alice Arden and her murder of Master Arden places the story within the context of contemporary discourses of marriage.<sup>180</sup> Her arguments,

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<sup>179</sup> Anne Wallens.

<sup>180</sup> Belsey 265-284.



however, apply to all the murder narratives. Seeing marriage as an institution in crisis, she argues that it “becomes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the site of a paradoxical struggle to create a private realm and to take control of it in the interests of the public good.”<sup>181</sup> Belsey concludes that the history of Alice’s crime is also a history of the development of, “modern marriage, modern domestic patriarchy.”<sup>182</sup> Accordingly, all the murderous wives in these stories are trapped in unhappy marriages. Ulalia’s Page’s story, like many women’s murder narratives, can be also read as a contemporary condemnation of arranged marriages, a point the murder ballad clearly articulates in its title: The Lamentation of Master Pages wife of Plimmouth who being forc’d to wed him, consented to his Murder for the love G. Strangwidge.<sup>183</sup> Her story reflects a contemporary concern with the roles of parents and the rights of children in marriage. Moralist Thomas Becon could have been speaking about Ulalia when he wrote in his “Catechism,” “some parents greatly abuse their authority, while they sell their children to other for to be married for worldly gain and lucre, even as the grazier selleth his oxen to the butcher to be slain.”<sup>184</sup> In the pamphlet, after her arrest Ulalia admits her guilt, while demonstrating no remorse and, “said she had rather dye with Strangwidge then to live with Padge.”<sup>185</sup> While the pamphlet’s treatment of the Page

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<sup>181</sup> Belsey 266.

<sup>182</sup> Belsey 284.

<sup>183</sup> Thomas Deloney, The Lamentation of Mr. Pages Wife of Plimouth (London, 1591).

<sup>184</sup>, Becon, “Catechism” quoted in Alan Macfarlane Marriage and Love in England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 135.

<sup>185</sup> Munday, Sundrye B3.

murder simply ends with her execution, Deloney's ballad, reprinted at least three times between 1591 and 1640, relates Ulalia's anguish at her marriage:

In blooming yeares my Fathers greedy minde,  
Against my will, a match for me did finde:  
Great wealth there was, yea, gold and silver store,  
But yet my heart had chosen one before.<sup>186</sup>

Although Ulalia has broken her marriage vows, her situation elicits more sympathy than many murderous women. She presents herself as already pledged to George Strangwidge, and, despite her tears and pleas, her parents forced her into marriage against her will. Beatrice-Joanna's predicament is also directly related to her arranged marriage to Alonzo Piracquo at the start of The Changeling. In a secret meeting with her lover Alsemero, Beatrice laments, "How well were I now if there were none such name known as Piracquo. Nor no such tie as the command of parents! I should be but too much blessed."<sup>187</sup> Elizabeth Caldwell's parents also arrange her marriage to Thomas. In his pamphlet, author Gilbert Dugdale sympathizes with Elizabeth's plight, and warns readers that "the like matches doe not often prove well."<sup>188</sup> While arranged marriages, like Beatrice-Joanna's to Alonzo, Elizabeth to Thomas Caldwell, and Ulalia to Master Page's inevitably lead to unhappiness and adultery, even companionate unions such as those between George and Anne Sanders, or

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<sup>186</sup> Deloney, Lamentation lines 9-12.

<sup>187</sup> The Changeling, II.ii.18-21.

<sup>188</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse A4.

Margaret to Anthony Ferne-seede, are vulnerable to women's moral laxity. In each of these unions, whether seduced by opportunistic and manipulative lovers, compelled by forceful parents, deluded by other nefarious women, or driven by her own pride, it is the wife's moral failings that lead to her husband's death and her ultimate downfall. These murder stories in play, pamphlet, and ballad form, warn their audiences of the dangers that befall marriages and society when women themselves succumb to sin.

Adulterous couplings, therefore, are never happy, fulfilling, or successful. Moreover, they are frequently portrayed in language that likens them to a theft of the husband's marital rights. In this sense, adulterous wives and adulterous love are characterized as stolen property. In The Lamentable And True Tragedie of M. Arden of Feversham, Arden is outraged with Mosbie's brazen relationship with Ales:

Nay on his finger did I spy the Ring,  
Which at our Marriage-day the Preest put on,  
Can any greefe be halfe so great as this...  
A Botcher and no better at the first,  
Who by base brocage, getting some small stock:  
Crept into service of a nobleman:  
And by his servile flattery and fawning,  
Is now become the steward of his house,  
And bravely jets it in his silken gowne.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Lamentable And True Tragedie A2.

Similarly, Deflores' description of his feelings for Beatrice-Joanna both confirms the power of their bond and commodifies it declaring,

I lov'd this woman in spite of her heart;  
Her love I earn'd out of Piracquo's murder.  
...and her honour's prize  
Was my reward; it was so sweet to me  
That I have drunk up all, left none behind  
For any man to pledge me.<sup>190</sup>

Deflores represents himself as usurper of his lover's body and virtue. Thomas Beast's wife "used far better affection" to her servant-lover than to her husband, who is thus presented as cheated of his wife's dutiful love.<sup>191</sup> When Curate Lowe seduces Master James' wife, the narrator describes their affair as "stolne pleasures (which all this while they did but pilfer from their trew Master)."<sup>192</sup> Finally, the treacherous Anne Welles refuses to take her new husband's name, share his bed, or even live with him, so that her lover Parker, "the villaine had free accesse to practise with her."<sup>193</sup> Invariably as well adulterous lovers are badly matched in status and class. Mistress Beast, Ales Arden, the minister's wife Mistress James, Beatrice-Joanna, and Mistress Browne in Two most unnaturall and bloodie Murthers, all

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<sup>190</sup> The Changeling, V.iii.165-171.

<sup>191</sup> A Briefe Discourse B4.

<sup>192</sup> Unknown, A True Relation of the most Inhumane and bloody Murther of master James Minster and Preacher (London, 1609) A3.

<sup>193</sup> The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering A3.

engage in illicit affairs with their husbands' servants.<sup>194</sup> In these relationships, the wife does not just deprive her husband of his marital rights she humiliates him by consorting with someone of lesser social stature. What Anne, Ales, Beatrice-Joanna, Mistresses James, Browne, and Beast, and other murderous wives dutifully owe their husbands they surreptitiously steal with their lovers.

While their love affairs are often presented as romantic, affectionate, and even passionate, wives and their lovers are inevitably ill-fated couples because of the illegitimacy of their relationships. Tomazo's warning to Alonzo about Beatrice-Joanna's faithlessness easily describes the unhappy marriages constructed in these murder texts:

Think what a torment 'tis to marry one  
Whose heart is leapt into another's bosom;  
If ever pleasure she receive from thee,  
It comes not in thy name, or of thy gift.  
She lies but with another in thine arms,  
He the half-father unto all thy children  
...And how dangerous  
And shameful her restraint may go in time to,  
It is not to be thought on without sufferings.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Unknown, Two most unnaturall and bloodie Murthers (London, 1605).

<sup>195</sup> The Changeling, II.ii.131-140.

Although betrayed husbands understandably have reason to mistrust their wives, mistrust is also evident between adulterous lovers in many of the narratives. In an aside, Mosbie confesses his concerns about a future with Ales Arden:

But what for that I may not trust you Ales,  
You have supplanted Arden for my sake,  
And will extirpen me to plant another:  
Tis feareful sleeping in a serpents bed.  
And I will clearely rid my hands of her  
But here she comes and I must flatter her.<sup>196</sup>

Ales and Mosbie's relationship, marked by mutual sexual desire and frank self-interest, promises to be a contest for power and authority where neither side entirely trusts or respects the other. Similarly, having been persuaded by Browne to commit adultery with him and consent to her husband's murder, Anne Sanders expresses regret and anger:

Ah bid me feed on poyson and be fat,  
Or looke upon the Basiliske and live,  
Or surfet daily and be stil in health,  
Or leape into the sea and not be drowned:  
All these are even as possible as this,  
That I should be recomforted by him,  
That is the Author of my whole lament.

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<sup>196</sup> A Warning G4.

Browne, in turn, projecting his motivations on to Anne, claims that she is responsible for all of this tragedy, and protests,

Why mistris Anne I love you dearly,  
And but for your incomparable beautie  
My soule had never dreamt of Sanders death  
Then give me that which now I do deserve,  
Your selfe, your love, and I will be to you  
A husband so devote, as none more just  
Or more affectionate shal treade this earth.<sup>197</sup>

Anne and Browne find themselves in circumstances similar to Ales and Mosbie, and Beatrice-Joanna with both Alsemero and Deflores. Possessing Anne is his payment for murdering Sanders. She was an irresistible object, his “bait,” and he sees her love as something to command. Her body and her feelings for him are objectified and understood by him only through the prism of his own desires. Anne, however, makes it clear that, like Mosbie for Ales, or Alsemero for Beatrice-Joanna, she cannot trust a man who would commit murder. She sees their relationship as “prophande with wicked vowes.”<sup>198</sup> Likewise, lovers in murder pamphlets, once reunited after the murder, find their relationships frequently marked by discord and mutual mistrust. After John Brewen’s murder, Anne and her lover Parker do not enjoy the happiness they expected. Instead, the narrator states,

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<sup>197</sup> A Warning G.

<sup>198</sup> A Warning G.

She durst not denie him anything he requested, and became so jelous that, had shee lookt but merely upon a man, shee should have known the price thereof... And yet was he not married unto her: yea, to (such) slaverie and subjection did he bring her that she must runne or goe wheresoever he pleased to appoint her, held hee up but his finger at any time; if she denied him either money or whatsoever else he liked to request, he wold so haule and pull her as was pittie to behold; yea, and threaten to stabbe and thrust her through with his dagger, did she not as he would have her in all things.<sup>199</sup>

Some lovers turn on or abandon each other when suspicions are raised. No sooner does Christopher kill his master, Thomas Beast, but he is caught “when presently he exclaimed on his Mistres, how she was cause y he committed the deed.”<sup>200</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede’s lover flees town once her husband is found murdered. Even if lovers keep faith with each other or reconcile, as Christopher and Mrs. Beast eventually do, both lovers are executed, sometimes in each others’ presence. Adulterous lovers who conspire to murder never live happily ever after.

Murderous wives are bad wives before they kill their husbands. Wives who kill their husbands demonstrate an inability to accept the confines of marriage and the responsibilities of a dutiful, faithful, and virtuous wife long before the murder is committed. Despite the differences of opinion regarding the roles of good Christian wives in the contemporary

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<sup>199</sup> The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering A4.

<sup>200</sup> A Briefe Discourse B4.



debates, none of these murderers conforms to anyone's conception of a 'good' wife. Ales Arden twists the conventions of the lover as thief, likening her husband instead to the culprit, saying,

Sweete Mosbie is the man that hath my hart:

And he usurpes it, having nought but this,

That I am tyed to him by marriage.

Love is a God and marriage is but words,

And therefore Mosbies title is the best

Tush whether it be or no, he shall be mine,

In spite of him, or Hymen and of rites.<sup>201</sup>

Ales's concept of marriage privileges her needs and desires over both those of her current husband, and the man who would take his place in the Arden household. Notwithstanding her modesty, Anne Sanders' speeches drop hints of dissatisfaction with her position in her life and marriage. Chafing at the restricted role of a modern merchant's wife her marriage is marked by frequent conflicts with her husband regarding his long hours at work, and money for household expenditures. While shopping with Anne Drurie for linens and gloves, Anne commands her servant to bring her money she has previously requested. Earlier, the servant warned George Sanders of his wife's planned purchases, to which he replies, "She must very well forbear awhile." Although the servant cautions him that Anne "will not be answered at my hand," Sanders responds that, as master of the house he commands refusal of money for

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<sup>201</sup> Lamentable and True Tragedie A3.

her. When her servant conveys his master's message, Anne scolds, "Howes that sir Knave? Your master charged you should deliver none? Go to, dispatch and fetch me thirtie pound. Or I wil send my fingers to your lips"<sup>202</sup> Her frustration with this restriction is clear:

Tis wel that I must stand at your reversion  
Intreate my prentice, curtesie to my man  
And he must be purse-bearer, when I neede  
This was not wont to be your masters order.<sup>203</sup>

That it is in fact her husband's order only underscores the extent to which Anne's status in the household is diminished. While Anne publicly accepts his authority, the humiliation of being forbidden to make her household purchases in front of her friend and merchants troubles her:

I am a woman, and in that respect  
Am well content my husband that controole me  
But that my man should over-awe me too  
And in the sight of strangers, mistris Drurie:  
I tell you true, do's grieve me to the heart.<sup>204</sup>

Drurie notes the moment to herself commenting,

Ile be sworn of that I never knew

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<sup>202</sup> A Warning C2.

<sup>203</sup> A Warning C3.

<sup>204</sup> A Warning C3.

But that you had at al times mistris Sanders

A greater summe than that at a command.

Mary perhaps the world now be chang'd.<sup>205</sup>

Anne does not accept her responsibilities as dutiful submissive wife easily. She is represented repeatedly committing “aberrations contrary to a wife’s subjection in doing things without or against (her) husband’s consent,” arguing over money, arguing with the household servant, and indulging her child’s “saucy” behavior while repeatedly chastising her husband for coming home late.<sup>206</sup> Increasingly, her interactions with her husband are marked by scolding words: “now Jesu man. That you will be so late upon the water?”<sup>207</sup> At another late return she quips, “If your meete be marred blame yourselfe, not the cook.” Sanders’ response in turn, reveals his familiarity with this accustomed quarrel: “How ere it be, wee take it in good part, For once and use it not, come let’s in sweet heart.”<sup>208</sup> The marriage represented here, like many in the murder texts, is one of friction and frustration.

Likewise, Margaret Ferne-seede, Anne Welles, Anne Wallen, and Ulalia Page are represented as shrewish quarrelsome wives, in addition to being unfaithful. Anne Wallen argues with her ‘loving’ husband: “I cald him Rogue, and slave and all to naught./ Repeating the worst language might be thought/ Thou drunken knave I said, and arrant sot, / Thy mind

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<sup>205</sup> A Warning C3.

<sup>206</sup> Gouge, domesticall duties Aughterson 92.

<sup>207</sup> A Warning C3.

<sup>208</sup> A Warning B4.

is set on nothing but the pot.”<sup>209</sup> Ulalia Page, married against her will to Master Page, complains, “I loathd to live, yet lived in deadly strife, / Because perforce I was made Pages wife.”<sup>210</sup> Thus, with lust come other temptations and murderous wives are susceptible to many sins. Although she admits to living a life of wealth and comfort, Mistress Turner nevertheless confesses,

With Eve I might have liv’d in Paradice,  
But that a Serpent did my Soule intice  
To touch forbidden fruit, which relish’d well  
In chewing, but being downe it smelt of Hell.  
Twas not one onely Apple to devoure,  
For which I long’d; my hunger gapd at more...<sup>211</sup>

Elizabeth Caldwell is courted assiduously by Jeffrey Bownd, “and being a man of good wealth, spared neither cost nor industrie both by himselfe and others to withdrawe her to his unlawfull desire.”<sup>212</sup> Anne Welles is courted by two goldsmiths, John Parker and John Brewen.<sup>213</sup> While Anne gladly accepts gifts of gold and jewels from Brewen, she prefers Parker. When Brewen, “seeing his suite took no effect,” cannot get his gifts returned, he arrests Anne, who promptly agrees to marry him. Margaret Ferne-seede is more ruthless and

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<sup>209</sup> Anne Wallens.

<sup>210</sup> Deloney Lamentation 27-8.

<sup>211</sup> “Mistress Turners Tears,” D-D2.

<sup>212</sup> Dugdale, True Discourse A3.

<sup>213</sup> Kyd, The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering.

acquisitive than Anne Welles. Married to Anthony who was “amongst his neighbors, reputed to be both sober and of very good conversation,” Margaret, by contrast, “was given to all the looseness and lewdnesse of life, which either unlawfull lust, or abhominable prostitution could violently cast upon her with the greatest infamie.”<sup>214</sup> Unbeknownst to her husband, Margaret, a former prostitute, now runs a brothel. Before learning of his death, she has already sold all his possessions, and her servant testifies to “the abomination of her life, and that since her marriage with his maister, She had lived in all disquietness, rage and distemperature, often threatening his life and contriving plots for his destruction.”<sup>215</sup> After she is arrested and jailed to wait for her trial, “she was sildome found to bee in charitie with any of her fellow prisoners, nor at any time in quiet with her selfe, rather a provoker then an appeaser of dissentions given to much swearing...continually scoulding so that she was as hatefull to all them that dwelt with her in that her last home.”<sup>216</sup> Unfaithful, spiteful, proud, materialistic, argumentative, and greedy as well as murderous, these women have “become the sinke of sinne and cage of uncleannesse.”<sup>217</sup>

Unlike their wives, husbands do not have much of an identity as characters beyond that of murder victim. In two different versions of the same story, Sundry Strange and Inhumaine Murthers, and The Lamentation of Mr. Pages Wife of Plimouth, Ulalia Glanfield,

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<sup>214</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede A3-4.

<sup>215</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B.

<sup>216</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B.

<sup>217</sup> George Saunders D2.

in love with George Strangwidge, is coerced into marrying the rich and elderly Master Page, whose first name is never revealed. We never learn about Master Page's character or temperament. He exists only as a husband and the source of Ulalia Page's misery:

Mine eyes dislik't my fathers liking quite  
My heart did loath my parents fond delight  
My greedy mind and fancy told to me,  
That with his age my youth could not agree...  
I wedded was and wrapped all in woe,  
Great discontent within my heart did grow...  
My chosen eyes could not his sight abide,  
My tender youth did scorn his aged hide,  
Scant could I taste the meat whereon I fed,  
My legs did loath to lodge within his bed.<sup>218</sup>

Recited in the first person, Page is not intended to be the focus of this narrative. Instead, the lamentation relates Mrs. Page's regret and remorse over her actions. Master Page's entire identity is as Ulalia's parents' fond delight, or her dislike, and her ballad mourns her actions more than the death of an innocent and respectable man. The pamphlet of the crime also barely fleshes out Master Page's character. The author describes him as "a widower, and one of the choicest inhabitants of that towne."<sup>219</sup> We do not know if Master Page is a kind or

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<sup>218</sup> Deloney, Lamentation.

<sup>219</sup> Munday, Sundrye strange B2.

attentive husband, only that his new wife “did within y space of one yeere and lesse, attempt sundry times to poison her husband.”<sup>220</sup> Aside from a graphic and brief description of surviving a poisoning attempt, where “he was compelled to vomit blood and much corruption,” Page’s next appearance in this story is as murder victim.<sup>221</sup> We never learn his first name, although the author helpfully tells us his murderers’ names are Tom Stone and Robert Priddis. Despite his desperate struggles in an extended, violent, and gruesome death scene, Page is simply a body, and later a corpse.

Nor is he the only husband reduced to supporting player in his own murder. Mistress Turner’s poem at the end of the pamphlet, The just Downefall of Ambition, Adulter Murder, describes her birth, childhood, marriage, and crime without mentioning her husband’s name once. George Sanders, murdered by his wife, her lover, and two accomplices, appears only briefly in the pamphlet, and is never even referred to by name in the ballad, The Wofull Lamentation of Mrs. Anne Saunders. Likewise, Thomas Beast is introduced twice in the first paragraph of his murder narrative, and then never again referred to by name, as the story turns its attention to the goals and efforts of the murderous wife and her lover, Christopher. Thomas’s death is not as involved or graphic as many pamphlet victims, however, his generosity and decency are as cruelly betrayed as his person. In his narrative, Thomas’s servant Christopher, who is conducting an adulterous affair with Thomas’s wife, meets his master in the field to pick a fight over his employment and wages. Utterly innocent of the

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<sup>220</sup> Munday, Sundrye strange B3.

<sup>221</sup> Munday, Sundrye strange B3.

machinations of wife and servant, “his Maister granted him so much as he demaunded, and turning from him, to open his pursse to give him the mony, Christopher strooke at him with the Bil in such cruel manner, y there he killed him.”<sup>222</sup> While often introduced as honest or well respected by neighbors, the general character description for husbands in crime pamphlets is victim; tales of victimized husbands are primarily stories of murderous wives and their accomplice-lovers.

Some husbands almost seem to deserve their fate. In a True Discourse, Thomas Dugdale writes that Thomas Caldwell, who is later poisoned by his wife Elizabeth, being young, and not experienced in the world, gave his minde to travell, and see foraine countries which tended rather to his losse than profit, as also to the great discontentment of his wife, and other his friends, leaving her often time verie bare, without provision of such meanes as was fitting for her, and by these courses hee did withdrawe her affection from him<sup>223</sup>

Master Browne, whose first name we never learn, is married to a rich widow, has a beloved though illegitimate grown daughter, and a young servant named Peter. Browne, however, is described as “being a man timorous, (for it is saide of him, that when he was walking alone he would talke to himselfe, and did ever feare he should be murdered),” and as “being troubled with the olde mans disease to take a Mouse for a Mountaine.” Furthermore, Browne has broken promises made to Peter to marry his daughter and inherit his land. Finally,

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<sup>222</sup> A Briefe Discourse B4.

<sup>223</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse A4-B.



although a respected and well-regarded minister, Master James ignores the gossip of his neighbors surrounding his wife and her lover Lowe. Rather than confront the adulterous pair, the misguided James chastises his parishioners instead:

Hee not only admonisht but very seriously threatened them, that if they persisted in any such ill kind of speaking, hee would urge the severity of the Law against them, affirming that if any shewe of familiarity were betwist Lowe and his wife, hee durst context (such and so confident was his trust in both their loyalties) it was both honest, civill, and without the reach of any such scandalous suspition.<sup>224</sup>

While Master James does not neglect or abuse his wife, he is dangerously inattentive to his disorderly household. Like Masters Sanders and Arden, Master James has focused on his profession to the detriment of his family and life. These husbands are seen making fatal mistakes that imperil their lives, not necessarily out of cruelty or deliberate wickedness, but because they are portrayed as weak, ineffectual, or simply absent from their roles as heads of household. In these pamphlets and broadsheets the murderous wife is the character whose desires, actions, and fate propel the story.

Murder pamphlets and ballads that present women transgressing social boundaries domesticate the crimes and engender their locations, further highlighting the woman's perversion of her feminine responsibilities and nature. When women kill husbands, or other members of their households, they attack their victims inside their own homes. However, when men are involved in the actual killing as lover-accomplices, or as hired assassins, the

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<sup>224</sup> A True Relation A4.

crimes take place outside. For most of the narratives in this collection, conspirators plot to kill husbands at the instigation of their wives. George Sanders, killed by his wife's lover and two of her accomplices at her consent, was killed on a highway in Kent in 1573. Master Arden of Faversham survives one attempted poisoning by his wife at home, and two attempted murders by hired assassins while traveling on business, only to finally be stabbed in his home by his wife, her lover, and their accomplices. Master Browne's servant Peter also kills his master in the woods at the encouragement of Mistress Brown. Anthony Ferne-seede's body is found dead in Peckham Field with his throat cut. Christopher kills Thomas Beast as he's plowing his field. Murders committed by men at the urging of women, or with their knowledge, consent, or aid, are generally committed outside and away from home.

When wives are the sole attackers, however, the violence is located at home. Master Caldwell's attempted murder takes place in his bedchamber after eating poisoned oatcakes. While he survives the attempt, the family's dogs, cat, and a neighbor child all die. Anne Welles poisons her husband John Brewen in the kitchen. He ultimately dies alone in his chamber, while his wife refuses to attend to his sickbed. Margaret Ferne-seede first attempts to kill her husband with poisoned broth at home. Master Page also suffers from poisoning, and "was compelled to vomit blood and much corruption," when his wife first attempts to kill him herself.<sup>225</sup> Finally, he is killed in his bedroom across the hall from his wife's room by two hired assassins. The minister Master James is also killed in his bedroom by his servant,

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<sup>225</sup> Munday, Sundry B3.

and wife's lover, Lowe.<sup>226</sup> In both cases, the adulterous wives conduct their affairs while refusing to share their husbands' beds. Thus, although the victims are killed by male murderers, the wives have first metaphorically killed their marriages by betraying their marriage vows, and refusing to perform their marital duties. Their husbands' deaths in these marital beds only highlight the disorder that murderous adulterous wives introduce into their households. Moreover, these murders and attempted murders do not simply take place in the home, they often occur in specific rooms particularly associated with women such as kitchens and bedrooms, and often refer ironically to wives' roles preparing and serving meals, and sharing beds in the service of conceiving children. Murderous wives pervert and subvert their roles, betraying their husbands, their families, and entire households.

A murderous wife exemplifies the "sinke of sinne." She is not simply unhappy, she "lives in strife" with her husband, berates him, complains when tries to assert his authority, and is unfaithful to him. While their husbands are usually decent and honest, murderous wives are patently dishonest, conning men out of gold and jewels, keeping lovers behind their husbands' backs, bearing illegitimate children, operating secret brothels, and contemplating their husband's financial ruin. They do not simply live unhappily with their husbands; they pursue passionate affairs with secret lovers. Not content to cuckold, murderous wives shame and humiliate their husbands with paramours who are often their husband's social inferiors: disinherited men, employees, or servants. More than this, however, they also plot the cold and brutal murder of their husbands. Playing the part of

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<sup>226</sup> A True Relation B.

loving wives, they poison oat cakes, sugar soppes, and oatmeal. They coordinate ambushes and consent to the beatings, stabbings, and strangulations of the men they promise to love, honor, and obey. They stand as warnings to other men and women of the dangers that lurk in bedrooms and closets when a weak feminine nature is corrupted by the evils of pride, greed, vanity, and sin. Wives may be beautiful, enticing, and virtuous, but when they encounter temptation, they descend to the depths of sin, bringing their readers and audiences with them.

### Secret Sin: Murderous Mothers

Margaret Vincent stealthily plots the deaths of her children long before she commits their murder: “in which opinion she steadfastly continued, never relenting according to nature, but casting about to find time and place for so wicked a deed, which unhappily fell out.”<sup>227</sup>

When children die at the hands of their mothers, they die in secret, with no witnesses, except God. Sometimes as well, they are born in secret, wrapping the murderous mother entirely in sin hidden with deceit. Even when children are not related to their killers, the stories construct a relationship between victim and murderess that resembles a maternal bond. The theme of deception plays a part in these stories too, as the murderess is revealed to be entirely devoid of the honesty and virtue she pretends. As Margaret waits to find an opportune moment alone to kill her babies, Jane Hattersley and Martha Scambler conceive illegitimate pregnancies that in turn must be delivered in secret. Annis Dell runs a tavern, but unbeknownst to her neighbors receives stolen goods while murdering and dismembering two

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<sup>227</sup> A pittillesse Mother A3.

kidnapped children. Elizabeth James secretly plots the murder of her young maid, while a stepmother entertains murderous designs on a strange houseguest who is in fact her stepson in disguise. Secrecy is a recurring theme in the deaths of children. The author of Martha's story, however, reminds readers though a murderer's "deeds be as secret as the works of hell," inevitably God "by one means or other make deeds of darkness clear as day."<sup>228</sup> Women who murder children may sin in secret, but evil cannot remain hidden forever.

Like murderous wives, women who kill children are immersed in sin before they commit murder. Margaret Vincent's murderous act is precipitated first by her association with a local and secret group of practicing Catholics. The author states,

her opinion of the true faith (by the subtle sophistry of some close Papists) was converted to a blind belief of bewitching heresy...having learned this maxim of their Religion, that it was meritorious (yea and pardonable) to take away the lives of any opposing Protestants...in which resolution or bloody purpose she long stood upon and at last (only by the Devil's temptation) resolved the ruin of her own children.<sup>229</sup>

For others, greed is as persuasive and all encompassing as Catholic heresy. The father and stepmother in Newes From Perin are struggling with business setbacks and unpaid creditors.<sup>230</sup> While the elderly husband is generous to a fault, his young wife is described as

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<sup>228</sup> Deeds Against Nature B.

<sup>229</sup> A Pittillesse Mother A3.

<sup>230</sup> Newes B3.

“somewhat churlish, and more respecting her owne future estate than his present welfare.”<sup>231</sup>

When a poor sailor asks for food and shelter, she wants to refuse while her husband urges charity. Only after the man explains that he has gold to pay them for their hospitality, does the stepmother,

thinking of her present wants, and looking of the Golde, cast about twenty wayes, how to enjoy it for her alone when presently the Devill, that is always ready to take holde of the least advantage that may be to increase his kingdome, whispered this comfort in her eare, shewing her the golden temptation: saying, all this will I give thee, if thou wilt but make away a poore stranger that sleepes under thy mercy.<sup>232</sup>

The stepmother is demonstrably selfish, materialistic, argumentative, and uncharitable. Even her plan to commit murder reveals the disorder in her marriage and household:

She comes the third time to his bedside, and to make her temptation the more forcible, presents the gold, fetching her hellish argument a minore ad major, thus: how easily and with what little or no danger such a kings masse of wealthe might be purchased: which when he rescid(?) by urging the unlawfulnessse of it, she burst out into bitter extreames and cursings, calling him faint hearted coward, and wished that if he did let slip that occasion, he might lye and rot in a Gaole, knowing that she

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<sup>231</sup> Newes B3.

<sup>232</sup> Newes B4.

would not only animate and set on all his Creditors to his utter undoing – but mishearten and drawe all her and his friends from helping and relecing him.<sup>233</sup>

Like the stepmother, Elizabeth James is also materialistic, greedy, and quarrelsome. When she accepts a young woman into her household,

seeing the young Maide to be a pretty young wench and handsomely appareled: but especially minding the profitable promise she made her, with an outward shew of pious compassion, and pittie, took her into her house, where for a time she so kindly and lovingly used her that the poor harmlesse Mayden thought her selfe very happy...this deceitfull woman, when she perceiv'd the Mayd had some store of money, by little, and little, some at one time, and some at an other, she nere left borrowing of her, till shee had left no more to lend her; and no onely thus decived her of her money, but her cloathes also.<sup>234</sup>

Elizabeth also fights with her husband over money and her treatment of the girl. Women who murder children are morally weak and prone to sin. They succumb to evil temptations well before they prey on their families and households.

Some mothers who murder are more prone to lust than love of money or a false religion. In early modern England, infanticides generally involved a young, unmarried

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<sup>233</sup> Newes C.

<sup>234</sup> Three Bloodie Murders C2.

servant who kills her newborn to avoid disgrace and loss of employment.<sup>235</sup> In popular literature, unmarried mothers are guilty twice over for being sexually promiscuous and murderous. Martha Scambler, the murderous mother in Deeds Against Nature, and Monsters by kinde, throws her newborn in a privy. The pamphlet's author thoroughly describes the extent of Martha's depravity:

Therefore...cast your eyes upon this other monster of nature, which was a lascivious, lewd and close strumpet, a harlot...to this graceless wanton (spending her youth in lascivious pleasure, as many a one doth in and about this Citty) happed to prove with child, and having no husband to cover this her act of shame, and withal fearing the disgrace of the world by a devilish practise sought to consume it in her body before the birth.<sup>236</sup>

When this attempt is not successful, Martha gives birth alone and in secret silence, throwing the infant into the privy. A barking dog, also trapped in the privy, attracts the neighbors who then discover "the sweet Babe lying all besmeared with the filth of that loathsome place."<sup>237</sup> The particular indignity of a privy underlines the repugnance of a sexually promiscuous woman, who behaves out of bounds of social strictures, and the gross shameful nature of this double crime.

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<sup>235</sup> Susan D. Amussen, An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 113; Dolan, Dangerous Familiars, 130; J.S. Cockburn, Crime in England: 1550-1800 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 187-208; J.A. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide," 29-48.

<sup>236</sup> Deeds Against Nature A4.

<sup>237</sup> Deeds Against Nature B.



Although Jane Hattersley's murdered babies are all illegitimate, instead of throwing them in the privy, she and her married lover Adam Adamson bury them secretly in his garden. The author states that Jane was "fit for his thoughts," and is like her lover who "with a show of honesty and good dealing covered a mass of dishonest and putrefied cogitations; amongst which, the most rank and corrupted were of lust."<sup>238</sup> Moreover, before she murders her children, Jane makes repeated attempts to poison her mistress who is spared "by the will of the almighty."<sup>239</sup> Their relationship is both illicit and long-lasting: "Many yeares did this olde Lecher maintaine this young Lena in this obscure and most foule sinne, in so thicke a cloud of secrecie, as the divell makes fit...for ten or twelve harvests have they reapt the most wicked pleasures of their ungodly lust."<sup>240</sup> Not only is their affair secret, Jane also gives birth in secret to at least four infants during the course of the narrative. An adulterous attempted murderer, Jane is fully corrupted with secret sin.

Like Martha, Jane is able to hide her pregnancies and births "with loose lacing, tucking, and other odde tricks that she used, that to the very instant minute of her deliverie, none could perceive she was with child."<sup>241</sup> In both stories, the authors suggest that their ability to give birth and recover in secret, without the aid of midwives and knowledge of

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<sup>238</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother A4.

<sup>239</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother A4.

<sup>240</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother A4-B.

<sup>241</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B.

neighbors, is a clear sign of their patent dishonesty.<sup>242</sup> Eventually, however, Jane's neighbors begin to suspect her pregnancies, and their suspicions grow when no babies ever appear. Despite increased neighborly surveillance, Jane continues her relationship with Adamson, and, when she inevitably becomes pregnant, continues to deliver and murder in secret. Although the narrative describes three infanticides, and one baby who survives, the author insists, "many great bellies had she besides these here spoken of, but the unhappy loads of them could never be seen: by which we may justly think and perfectly in reason, know, that there were many more murders than are in these leaves laid open."<sup>243</sup> Unlike Martha, Elizabeth, the Perin stepmother, or Margaret, who each kill in one moment of desperate horror, Jane repeatedly conceives and murders her newborn babies with no remorse. Jane, likened to a "Chimera, with a Lions upper-part in bouldnesse: a Goates middle part in lust: and a Serpents lower part in sting and poyson," is monstrous evil personified.<sup>244</sup>

Murdered children are always pretty, innocent, sweet babies. Margaret Vincent's children are described as "having a countenance so sweet that might have begged mercy at a tyrant's hand," and "of that small age that it could hardly discern a Mother's cruelty."<sup>245</sup> Jane

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<sup>242</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B2; Deeds Against Nature A4.

<sup>243</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B3.

<sup>244</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B3.

<sup>245</sup> A Pittillesse Mother A4.

Hattersley's dead infants are both "pretty" and "sweet."<sup>246</sup> Martha Scambler gives birth to a "poore tender babe," whose "sweet" body is dumped in the privy.<sup>247</sup> Little Elizabeth, whose parents and brother are killed by a band of thieves, and whose tongue is cut out to keep her from identifying them, walks to her fate holding her attacker's hand. Ignorant of her parents' and brother's death, and told she'll be returning home, she innocently asks the murderess Annis, "Gammer shall my mother make me ready tomorrow morning, kisse me when I come from schoole, and heare me say my lesson?"<sup>248</sup> Her youth and innocence are deliberately set in stark contrast to Annis's ruthlessness:

the she-wolf beguiled the remaining child, a little girl, by asking her questions as what she walked upon, what she saw withal, and what she spakel withal. The child answered to everyone directly, pointing to her foot, her eye, and to her tongue...whereupon this bloody tigress to make herself more monstrous, bade her put out her tongue that she might feel it. The child, doing what she bade her, she presently caught it by the end, and with her thumb wresting open the child's jaws to the widest she could stretch them, she cut it out even by the root.<sup>249</sup>

Even the full-grown son, and former pirate, murdered by his stepmother and father in Newes From Perin in Cornwall, is described as vulnerable and innocent before his predatory parents:

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<sup>246</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B.

<sup>247</sup> Deeds Against Nature A4

<sup>248</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother B2.

<sup>249</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B2.

He cumming to the bedside found him fast a slepe and looking stedfastly  
on him a drop of blood fell from his [wife] upon the young mens breast, and  
seemed to blush and loke red, as if it had in dumbe signe diswaded him from  
that divellish intent.<sup>250</sup>

Yet while children are generally sweet and innocent, they have little identity beyond that of victims, and are rarely named, or given ages. Nameless and genderless, all of Jane Hattersley's infants but one are smothered at birth. The sole survivor is identified only as "he." Margaret Vincent's two and five year old children are also never named or gendered, but they smile and babble sweetly as she strangles them. Even Elizabeth James' young murdered maid is rendered simply "a pretty young wench."<sup>251</sup> The boy in The Most Cruell and Bloody Murther is only named Anthony James on the title page. He is never referred to by name in the text. His sister is the story's heroine, identifying her attacker and brother's killer, despite being referred to as "the girle" until the very end of the story. Although she is finally able to pantomime her name, Elizabeth, she is never again referred to as such. Significantly, she is the only child victim in this collection of pamphlets who is not related to her murderer. Their interactions, however, are constructed to resemble a quasi-maternal/filial bond, and Elizabeth's innocent naivety further underscores Annis Dell's evil nature. The two are positioned as mutually defining and dependent characters, and Elizabeth is thus not merely innocent and sweet, she embodies these qualities without having an individual

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<sup>250</sup> Newes C.

<sup>251</sup> Three Bloodie Murders C2.

identity of her own. The young victims in crime pamphlets and broadsheets primarily serve as props for their murderers. Even when children like Elizabeth or the son/stepson in Newes From Perin are active characters, as the full titles of their pamphlets reveal, these remain primarily stories of murder committed by “mercilesse” women.<sup>252</sup>

Like the wives who poison their husbands, mothers and mistresses murder their children at home. Elizabeth James decapitates her maid in “an inner room,” and buries the body in her garden.<sup>253</sup> Both Martha Scambler and Jane Hattersley kill their infants in their bedrooms minutes after each baby is born. Accordingly, images of murderous mothers also locate the crime at home. Margaret Vincent is depicted in the woodcut fronting her murder pamphlet, shown below as figure 3, strangling her children as they lie on a luxuriously appointed bed. The richness of the bedcover and woodcarvings contrasts with the naked bodies of the little children, emphasizing their vulnerability. Unlike other images in this collection, Margaret Vincent is joined in the act by the Devil. He stands opposite the bed, balancing the scene. He holds two ropes, presumably to strangle the children. This scene, with the Devil’s presence, emphasizes the violation of Margaret’s household. She is not simply neglecting her motherly duties in the slaughter of her children. Margaret has abandoned her Protestant religious beliefs and joined a secret group of Roman Catholics. In so doing, Margaret Vincent has summoned the Devil himself into her home and bedroom to murder her own children. Her elegant clothes and comfortable home not only reveal her

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<sup>252</sup> Newes A.

<sup>253</sup> Three Bloodie Murders C2.

social status as a gentleman's wife, they also allude to the vanity and greed of a secret Catholic with a fondness for luxurious apparel and furnishings. Margaret is not only murderous, she is also immodest, proud, and tempted to heresy by the "charming persuasions" of "Romaine Wolves."<sup>254</sup> Although The Bloudy Mother tells the story of Jane Hattersley's multiple infanticides, the accompanying illustrations do not all correspond to her narrative. The title page features a divided scene of Jane, in elaborate ruff and farthingale, and her lover Adam Adamson burying the body of a dead infant. The second half of the image features Adam's agonizing death, "eaten and consumed alive with Wormes and Lice."<sup>255</sup> Both images at once illustrate the events of the story inside, and portray the villains' wicked natures and earthly punishment. Inside the text, however, is a second print of a mother with her three dead children in what appears to be a tidy and well appointed Elizabethan kitchen. In this interior, we see a shelf with plates neatly lined. Mugs hang from hooks on the wall. The bodies of the children lie in a pile under a large table with a fringed cloth cover. A window clearly marks the separation of this woman from the outside world. Moreover, the murder is committed, not simply in any room, but the kitchen – the center of the maternal household. This mother may be appealing to heaven, the viewer, or is caught in the heat of her passion; perhaps the artist intended to portray all three actions at once. The inclusion of this image in the pamphlet, however, communicates the particular horror in stories of murderous mothers; destroying families and households, murderous mothers

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<sup>254</sup> Pittilesse A3.

<sup>255</sup> Brewer, The Bloudy Mother A.

pervert the concept of motherhood. These women in beautiful clothes and comfortable homes are caught in the act of destroying the most precious treasures given them by God.

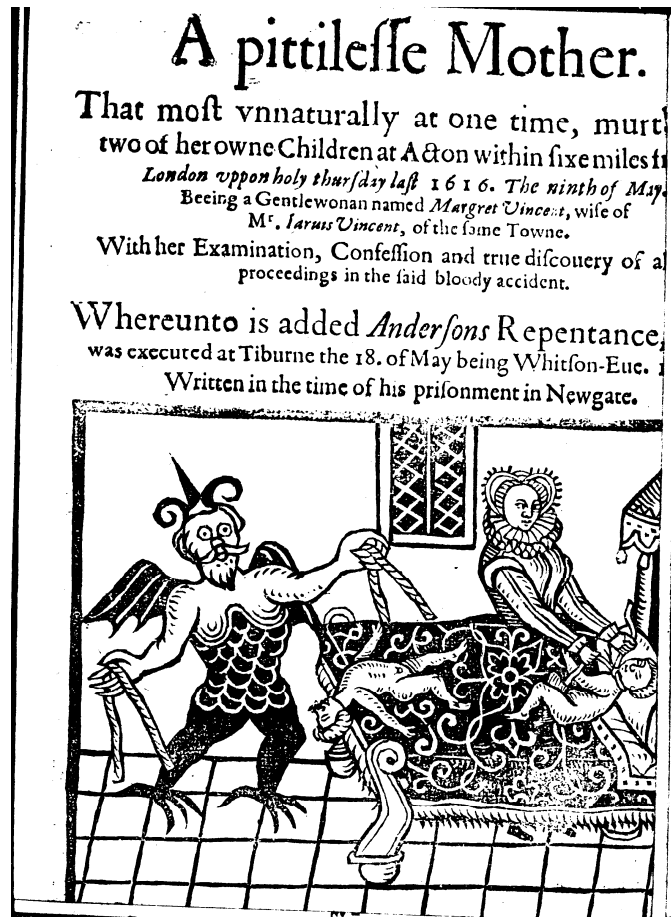


Fig. 3. Margaret Vincent, woodcut from A pittilesse mother (London, 1616), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Because murdered children are especially sweet and innocent, and murderous mothers particularly sinful, murder narratives emphasize the monstrous nature of these crimes using dramatic imagery. Thus, women who kill the young are vicious wild animals. As a familiar symbol of evil and sin in English literature, the tiger or tigress was a

particularly useful image of fierce rapacity. Medieval bestiaries employed images and stories of animals for moral instruction, and the tiger was often associated with ferocity as well as the sins of pride and vanity.<sup>256</sup> The bestiary fable details a hunter who steals a tiger cub and is chased by its enraged mother. In order to save himself, the hunter throws down a mirror, and the tigress is captivated by her reflection, either mistaking her image for her cub, or enamored of her fantastic form.<sup>257</sup> Ovid's Procne, who kills her child despite "his pretie arms about the necke had hugde hir faste, / And flattring wordes with childish toyes in kissing forth had cast," is a vengeful, proud, and unspeakably cruel tigress.<sup>258</sup> While the Oxford English Dictionary lists the first use of the word "tigress" in Randle Cotgrave's 1611 dictionary, Annis Dell is described as a "bloody Tygris" in The Most Cruell and Bloody Murder, printed in 1606.<sup>259</sup> Moreover, in another version of Annis' story, printed the same year for the same pamphlet seller, Annis receives a large bag of gold in exchange for taking the two children orphaned by a pair of murderous thieves. After killing the boy and dismembering the little girl, Annis "bestowed greate cost in altering, repaying, and

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<sup>256</sup> Carmen Brown, "Bestiary Lessons on Pride and Lust," Debra Hassig, ed., The Mark of the Beast (New York: Routledge, 2000) 53-70. Quoting Richard of Fournival's Bestiare d'amour, Brown writes, "For however great its rage if its cubs have been stolen, if it comes upon a mirror it has to fasten its eyes upon. And it so delights in gazing at the great beauty of its good form that it forgets to pursue the men who stole its cubs" (56). Brown makes extensive use of bestiary images and texts from English and French sources, including the Ashmole Bestiary and the Bodley 764, at the Bodleian Library; The OED cites Chaucer's Squire's Tale from 1386, which describes the tiger as a "cruell beast," second ed.1989, University of Central Florida Library, 18 May 2009 <<http://www.dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.ucf.edu>>.

<sup>257</sup> Brown 55.

<sup>258</sup> Golding, VI.792-3.

<sup>259</sup> Randall Cotgrave, A dictionarie of the French and English tongues (London, 1611); The Most Cruell and Bloody Murther B2.



furnishing of her house, which made many of her neighbors much to wonder.”<sup>260</sup> Thus Annis is not only cruel, but proud and greedy as well. Elizabeth James, the murderer who covets a young girl’s gold and fine clothing, before cruelly killing and dismembering her, is a “Tiger-hearted woman.”<sup>261</sup> Queen Margaret, in 3 Henry VI, is described by York as a “tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide,” for killing his twelve year old son. Both Regan and Goneril are accused of being, “Tigers, not daughters,” in King Lear.<sup>262</sup> Margaret Vincent is simultaneously likened to two bloodthirsty beasts when she “purposed to become a Tigerous Mother, and so wolfishly to commit the murder of her own flesh and blood.”<sup>263</sup> Jane Hattersley is not only “more then Tyger like,” she is also parts chimera, lion, goat, and serpent for the murders of her newborn babies.<sup>264</sup> These killers are seen as both wild animals and unnatural women.

In a pronounced shift from the medieval ferocious tiger that protected her cubs, to Ovid’s Procne who slaughtered her child, murderous mothers in these narratives are tigresses because they are perceived as violating their sex’s natural instincts to protect their young. Annis Dell is described as not having “any sparke of womanhood, who by nature are kinde,

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<sup>260</sup> Unknown, The Horrible Murther of a young Boy (London, 1606) A3.

<sup>261</sup> Three Bloodie Murders C2.

<sup>262</sup> William Shakespeare, 3 Henry VI, 1.4.137; King Lear, 4.2.41.

<sup>263</sup> A Pittillesse Mother A3.

<sup>264</sup> The Bloudy Mother B3.

flexible, and remorseable.”<sup>265</sup> Jane Hattersley is “unworthy the name of a mother.”<sup>266</sup> The narrator continues,

mothers have harts of wax that melt and consume in the heate of sorrow, that comes by the wrong of their children: and eyes (that like full fountains) in abundance of tears, shew the greefe and anguish they suffer for the least wrong their children suffer. But this wretch hath a hart of steele, and eyes of marble so indurage that no motion of heaven, or sparke of humane pittie could be seene or perceived in them.<sup>267</sup>

Margaret Vincent, “not deserving Mothers name,” is also condemned as one “who by nature should have cherisht them (her children) with her owne body, as the Pelican that pecks her owne brest to feed her youngs ones with her blood: but she more cruell than the Viper, the inevenomd Serpent, the Snake, or any Beast whatsoever, against all kind, takes away those lives to whom she first gave life.”<sup>268</sup> Murderous women described as tigresses, serpents, wolves, and monsters evince a parallel, idealized construction of woman as naturally loving, nurturing, and soft. Women who butcher the children in their care, betray their elderly fathers, or kill their servants have betrayed the trust endowed them as caretakers. In popular literature, tiger-hearted women kill the weak and vulnerable, while their virtuous

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<sup>265</sup> The Most Cruell and Bloody Murther B2.

<sup>266</sup> The Bloudy Mother B.

<sup>267</sup> The Bloudy Mother B-B2.

<sup>268</sup> A Pittillesse Mother A4.

counterparts, mothers, daughters, and wives, love and nurture. These murderesses do not just violate the laws of state, they violate the laws of nature and God.

Murderous mothers, like murderous wives, are deeply sinful women; they are greedy, lustful, proud, angry, and full of deceit. Unlike the women accused of infanticide at the assizes, fictional murderesses are never poor and desperate in the narratives. Their husbands are respectable, capable, and honest men and their children are exceptionally sweet and good. These mothers, in turn, are unnatural, and the crimes they commit are not just cruel, they are monstrous betrayals of innocence and love. Murderous mothers do not just kill their offspring, they smother newborns at the breast, brutally strangle babies on their laps, torture children while holding their hands, and cruelly ruin and humiliate them, before dismembering their battered bodies. Murderous mothers also hide their sin, behind strategically draped kirtles, and in hidden plots in the garden. They secretly meet with lovers, heretic Catholics, and murderous accomplices, give birth hidden behind locked doors, and repeatedly lie to their husbands, servants, and neighbors. When caught, they rarely show remorse, and are, like Jane Hattersley, “too bad to beare the good name of woman.”<sup>269</sup> Women who murder children transgress the bounds of womanhood, and are entirely void of a woman’s natural feminine instinct to nurture and love, according to the authors of these narratives. As inversions of femininity, they are not simply bad mothers, they are awful women who compound their wickedness with horrendous hidden evil.

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<sup>269</sup> The Bloody Mother B3.

A Multitude of Sins: Murder in the Community

Susan Higges admits her crimes in a murder ballad, confessing,  
most wickedly I spent my time,  
devoide of godly grace:  
A lewder Woman never liv'd,  
I thinke in any place...  
My weapon by the high-way side,  
Hath me much money wonne:  
In mens attire I oft have rode,  
Upon a Gelding stout,  
And done great robberies valiantly  
The Countries all about.<sup>270</sup>

Some of the texts' murderers, like Susan, pose a threat outside their households, to their neighbors and the community at large. On stage, these murderers attack romantic or political rivals. In pamphlets and ballads, they attack innocent men and women in towns across the country. When women kill their neighbors, they are often assisted by devious forces, murderous accomplices, or the Devil himself, and are rarely portrayed as married wives or ardent lovers. If they are mothers, their children are grown. These children are often like

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<sup>270</sup> Unknown, The sorrowful complaint of Susan Higges (London, 1616) English Broadside Ballad Archive, ed. Patricia Fumerton 2006, U of California at Santa Barbara, 11 March 2009  
[http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/Pepys1/facs\\_trans/L/Pepys\\_fac1\\_0124-0125\\_L.jpg](http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/Pepys1/facs_trans/L/Pepys_fac1_0124-0125_L.jpg).

their mothers, wicked and murderous. Like criminal mothers and wives, women who murder in these stories, are tainted with sin. These women's sins, moreover, parallel the wide diversity of their victims; murderous women murder out of greed, lust, vanity, pride, vengeance, or sheer cruelty, and often exhibit all these vices simultaneously. They deceive lovers, friends, and neighbors, living dissolute lives, marked by scandalous reputations. While mothers and wives who murder within their households threaten familial and patriarchal order, women who murder outside their families, physically endanger society itself. Their victims are ordinary men and women, the same kinds of citizens who bought crime pamphlets, sang ballads in taverns and market squares, and attended the theater. Finally, women who murder their neighbors and friends are also caught through the concerted efforts of their communities. While their families and neighbors also apprehend murderous wives and mothers, stories of women who murder outside their immediate households prominently feature the resourceful, clever, brave efforts of law abiding, virtuous, and honorable men and women. Their actions are presented as beneficial to the whole community, and the state at large. Women who murder are a danger to society, and these narratives in particular, demonstrate society uniting in the face of that threat.

Witchcraft stories feature the murder and harassment of neighbors. Witches may murder one victim, but they are portrayed as mass criminals with a list of victims and accusations detailed in the narratives. Furthermore, each crime is itself a short story of rancor and revenge. Joan Cunny bewitched Finch's wife for refusing her demand for a drink because she claimed to be too busy brewing. Mother Stile bewitched a boy who was fetching

water from a well near her door after he “hurled a stone upon her house.”<sup>271</sup> When John Harrold accused Joan Upney of witchcraft in 1589, she ordered her toad familiar to kill his wife.<sup>272</sup> Joan Flower and her daughters caused harm to the Earl of Rutland’s family over several years including killing his son, making his other children and brother sick, and causing his wife and daughter to be infertile. Ellen Greene bewitched the baker of Goadby. Elizabeth Stile and her cohorts Mother Margaret, Mother Dutton, Mother Deuell, and Father Rosimond persecuted to death over several years Lanckforde, a farmer, Master Gallis, the former mayor of “Windsore,” and Switcher the butcher, as well as several other neighbors.<sup>273</sup> In addition to the murders they commit, witch pamphlets and ballads often detail acts of vandalism that injure specific households and neighbors, including hens that no longer lay eggs, stacks of firewood dislodged and ruined, cows with curdled or bloody milk, gardens rendered barren, and men, women, and children maimed, paralyzed, or convulsed with sudden fits. These incidents also reveal the ways households and neighbors in towns and villages were often related or interdependent on each other. Witches are frequently portrayed begging or bartering from neighbors for milk, butter, or dry goods, and seem to live if not in abject poverty, then less comfortably than their neighbors. Their murderous resentment in being denied items is a common refrain in witchcraft narratives of the late sixteenth century. In the earliest extant witchcraft pamphlet published in England, Elizabeth Frauncis “desired

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<sup>271</sup> Unknown, Rehearsall both straung and True, (London, 1579) B2.

<sup>272</sup> Unknown, The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches (London, 1589) B.

<sup>273</sup> Rehearsall A7.

firste of the sayde Cate (calling it Sathan) that she might be ryche and to have goodes.”<sup>274</sup>

With this one exception, witches don’t look to sorcery for economic gain in the literature; they turn to their neighbors. While perhaps not as greedy as Margaret Ferne-seede or Elizabeth James, witches’ murders are, nevertheless, constructed as economic crimes, and the witch herself as a direct threat to the physical safety and economic survival of the entire community.

Representations of witches in popular literature also participate in discursive constructions of sin. The Flower sisters are reported to employ witchcraft to seduce men, and have several illegitimate children during the course of their narrative.<sup>275</sup> Agnes Browne is described as a woman

Of poore parentage and poorer education, one that as shee was borne to no good was for want of grace never in the way to receive any, ever noted to bee of an ill nature and wicked disposition...This Agnes Browne had a daughter whose name was Joane Vaughan...a maide (or at least unmarried) as gracious as the Mother, and both of them as farre from grace as Heaven from hell. This Joane was so well brought up under her mothers elbow, that shee hanged with her for Company under her mothers nose.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Unknown, The Examination of certaine Wytches (London, 1566) A7.

<sup>275</sup> Unknown, The Wonderful Discovery of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower (London, 1619) D.

<sup>276</sup> Unknown, The Witches of Northamptonshire (London, 1612) B2.

Mary Sutton, executed for the murder of Master Enger's young son, enters Master Enger's bedroom, "and sate by his bedde side...and told him if hee would consent that she should come to bedde to him, hee should be restored to his former health and prosperitie."<sup>277</sup> Joane Cunny, executed for the bewitched murder of Elizabeth Finch, is described by the pamphlet's author as, "living very lewdly, having two lewde Daughters, no better than naughty packs, had two Bastard Children."<sup>278</sup> Annis Glascocke, in A True and just Recorde, is reported to be both a witch, and "a naughtie woman," suspected of having affairs with several married men, while Annis Herd, "a light woman, and a common harlot," according to one of her neighbors, has a seven year old illegitimate daughter fathered by a man married to one of her murder victims.<sup>279</sup> Elizabeth Fraunces, having learned witchcraft at the age of 12 from her grandmother Eve, has her imp procure her two husbands, and on both occasions she engages in pre-marital sex, becomes pregnant, and aborts the fetus.<sup>280</sup> Accused witches in popular literature are condemned by narrators and neighbors for bearing children out of wedlock, and for behaving wickedly with their children. Joan Pechey's examination, according to A true and just Recorde, features her consistent denials of practicing witchcraft. Changing tactics, her examiner Brian Darcie charges Joan, "to have willed her Sonne Phillip Barrenger, being of the age of xxiii yeares to lye in bedde with her." Phyllip himself testifies, "that manye

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<sup>277</sup> Unknown, Witches Apprehended (London, 1613) B3.

<sup>278</sup> The Apprehension A4.

<sup>279</sup> Unknown, A true and just Recorde (London, 1582) C2, F3.

<sup>280</sup> The Examination A8.



times and of late hee hath lyne in naked bed with his owne mother, being willed and commaunded to doe of her.<sup>281</sup> While Barbara Rosen denies the relationship is incestuous, Marion Gibson argues that the author's inclusion of the testimony suggests an attempt to massage an otherwise routine and unproductive examination into a shocking moment to enhance the drama for readers.<sup>282</sup> Joan's relationship with her son is not the only allusion to incest in the cultural construction of witches. Lifting material verbatim from Reginald Scot's The Discovery of Witchcraft, Thomas Middleton's play The Witch includes a scene between Hecate and her son Firestone that reveals their incestuous relationship.<sup>283</sup> Scot writes that witches were commonly thought to have intercourse with family members. If incestuous relations were thought to occur in witch families, Darcie's insinuating questions to Joan Pechey aren't just titillating images suggested for the pamphlet's readers, they also participate in narrative strategies used to identify and prove the existence of witches. Whether or not Brian Darcie believed that Joan was committing incest with her son, this passage in the narrative suggests an implicit belief that witches, as inherently sinful women, were sexually transgressive as well as murderous. Despite commonly represented as ugly and old in woodcuts and engravings, many witches resemble young, lustful murderous wives

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<sup>281</sup> A true and just Recorde C5.

<sup>282</sup> Gibson, Early Modern Witches 98; Barbara Rosen, Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969) 129.

<sup>283</sup> Thomas Middleton, The Witch (London, 1616), Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge ed, Three Jacobean witchcraft plays (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), I.ii.93-101.

in pamphlets and ballads, whose crimes against their neighbors are abrogated by their sexual immorality.

Anne Drurie is a murderous and promiscuous witch whose story is not related in the style of traditional witchcraft pamphlets. The other woman responsible for George Sanders' murder, Anne is a widow living alone with her steward Roger, and her daughter, whose marriage she is trying to arrange. Her character as a widow and cunning woman with a thriving business enjoys considerable social and economic freedom to travel around London, meeting with men and women. In the play version of the Arden murder, she appears alone on stage in more scenes with Browne than his lover Anne Sanders. Her reputation is not questioned by any of the characters in the play except the allegorical Tragedy. Master Sanders even approves of Drurie, asking Anne, "And what good company?/ None to sup with us: Send one for Nan Drewry, / Sheele play the wagge, tell tales and make us merrie."<sup>284</sup> Drurie, however, engages in a relationship with her servant Roger that the play is particular to characterize as sinful. During the allegorical masque, Lust and the Furies sit down to a banquet with Browne, Anne Sanders, Anne Drurie, and Roger. The script details the ensuing scene:

The Furies fill wine, Lust drinckes to Browne, he to Mistris Sanders, shee  
pledgeth him: Lust embraceth her, she thrusteth Chastity from her, Chastity wrings  
her hands, and departs: Drury and roger imbrace one another.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> A Warning for Faire Women B4.

<sup>285</sup> A Warning for Faire Women D.

As lovers, and co-conspirators in the Sanders murder, Drurie and Trusty Roger delight in each other's opportunism and cleverness. He complements her scheme to bring Browne and Anne Sanders together as "A verie good cloake mistres for the raine, / And therein I must needes commend your wit," to which Drurie returns the complement, stating,

Why now thou art as I would have thee be

Conceited and of quicke capacitie...

But Hodge, thou art my hearts interpreter.<sup>286</sup>

Despite the inequality of their ranks, each easily shifts in and out of authority, as when Roger suggests, "But mistris, shal I tell you what I thinke...If youle be ruld by me, Let them pay you well for what you undertake." She listens to his suggestions, and he reminds her that Anne and Browne are not the first couple they've manipulated:

...nor is she the first by many,

That you have wonne to stoope unto the lewre,

It is your trade, your living, what needs more?

Drive you the bargain, I will keepe the doore.

Their relationship is characterized by mutual desire for material gain and social status. As they discuss Browne's wealth, Drurie plans to make enough money to marry her daughter to, "some rich Atturney, or Gentleman."<sup>287</sup> Anne's willingness to play bawd, sell love potions, and con gullible wealthy clients out of gold is matched only by Roger's enthusiastic

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<sup>286</sup> A Warning for Faire Women B4.

<sup>287</sup> A Warning for Faire Women G.

scheming. While their relationship is affectionate and easy, it is a partnership also intertwined with lust and greed, and together they drive the murder plot. Anne and Roger direct Anne's seduction, and Sanders' murder, instructing both Browne and Anne at every turn:

You know already she is wonne to this  
What by my perswasion, and your own suite  
That you may have her company when you will  
And she herselfe is thoroughly resolv'd  
None but George Browne must be her second husband.<sup>288</sup>

While Browne physically kills George Sanders and John Beane, the play places Drurie at the center of the murder conspiracy and the adulterous relationships. She orchestrates the affair between Anne and Browne, conducts one herself with her servant, and carries the greatest responsibility for seducing Anne not simply into adultery but eventually also murder. George Sanders might be oblivious to Drurie's wicked nature, but the audience is left in no doubt that she is villainous, and a "damned witch" besides.<sup>289</sup>

Although not a witch, Alice Walker is one of four conspirators accused of the murder of Mr. Trat, the Curate of Cleave.<sup>290</sup> Of Alice and her associates, the author states,

although they were not blemish'd before the committing of this fact with the

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<sup>288</sup> A Warning for Faire Women E.

<sup>289</sup> A Warning for Faire Women D2.

<sup>290</sup> Unknown, The crying Murther (London, 1624).

scandall of any notorious crimes, in the course of their former life and conversation, yet were they not free from the suspition of some faults, whereof youth by nature, and age by custome is too too guilty and capacious.<sup>291</sup>

Alice is the most outspoken of the four murderers. While Peter Smithwicke is known to be “a man of most faire, gentle and well balanced conversation,” Alice is overheard twice threatening the Curate’s life. Mr. Trat is not a particularly popular man in Cleave. He has had scandal follow him, with the suspicious drowning death of his wife, and the rape of a woman years earlier. For both crimes, although suspected by many, Mr. Trat is exonerated. Of these tragedies, the narrator blames gossipy neighbors, “the poison of Asps,” although Mr. Trat’s good reputation is still qualified: “for although he was none of the greatest Clarks, as they say, yet was he not a dumbe Pastor.”<sup>292</sup> As a murder victim, Mr. Trat does not elicit great sympathy. Aside from lingering suspicions of his past, the Curate is known to chastise parishioners during voluble sermons where he “did thunder and crye against the vices of his Parish,” and is involved in a long-standing bitter dispute with two respected neighbors who believe he has cheated them out of the vicarage of Cleave. No one makes much of Alice’s threats to cut the curate “as small as hearbs to the pot” should he come to Dunster Fair, or “that if the Parson did not come home the sooner, his powdred Beefe would stinke before his comming.”<sup>293</sup> However, Mr. Trat’s body does indeed turn up cut into pieces, powdered and

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<sup>291</sup> The crying Murther B2.

<sup>292</sup> The crying Murther B2.

<sup>293</sup> The crying Murther B4, C3.

stuffed in barrels, where its stench alerts concerned neighbors. After the suspects are arrested, they refuse to confess to the crime, and Alice in particular demonstrates a decided lack of remorse: “the evill spirit workeing strongly with her, made her insensible of these good and godly motions: and she returnes *Vi canis ad vomitum*, like a dogge unto the auntient vomit of her stubbornesse and denial.”<sup>294</sup> Alice does not enjoy a spotless reputation in Cleave. She is a menacing, angry, proud woman who was regarded by her neighbors with suspicion for her behavior long before the murder occurs. While Mr. Trat is not an entirely honorable victim, Alice is a decidedly bad woman who has committed a gruesome crime.

Of the murderous women in these texts, few can compare with the monstrously bad Queen Margaret who is responsible for two murders, and commits a third herself on stage in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*. She also conducts a passionately frank adulterous affair with Suffolk.<sup>295</sup> Together the lovers plot the death of the good Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, a rival to both for the King’s favor. Margaret’s dissatisfaction with her royal husband, and her ardent love for Suffolk, however do not create the conflict experienced by Anne Sanders, Ales Arden, Anne Welles, or Mrs. Beast. Margaret and Suffolk’s murderous schemes create powerful enemies, and ultimately cost Suffolk his life. While Margaret’s villainy may not cause her to murder her husband or child, her ruthless ambition does ruin her family, and pulls the entire kingdom into civil war. Appalled that Henry has bargained his throne for his life by naming York his successor, and disinheriting their son, Margaret announces an end to

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<sup>294</sup> The crying Murther D.

<sup>295</sup> 2 Henry VI, III.ii.394-400.

their marriage, stating, “I here divorce myself, / Both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed.”<sup>296</sup>

For the rest of the play she alone exercises royal and martial power, leaving Henry as a supporting character in the play and in their marriage. During the course of 3 Henry VI, Margaret acts as a single woman unencumbered by lover or controlling husband. Her ambiguous marital status is a critical component to her identity as a murderer. Margaret does not have a husband or lover to kill, but her cruelty is unleashed instead on anyone who might frustrate her ambitions. Her murder of political rival Richard, Duke of York, is represented as particularly cruel and shocking. After humiliating the would-be king with a paper crown, she offers him a handkerchief stained with his murdered twelve-year old son’s blood. Then, in a pronouncement of stunning irony, she stabs York proclaiming, “And here’s to right our gentle-hearted King.”<sup>297</sup> Margaret’s rank as Queen and her self-defined status as ‘divorced,’ put her in a social category unto herself, undefined by husband or master. This personal freedom, however, comes at a terrible cost to her character and her soul. Margaret is not the heroine of the Henriad plays. In redefining her own marital and socio-political status, Margaret rejects women’s socially proscribed and naturally endowed roles and responsibilities. While she is only one of the play’s many ruthless villains, in her character Shakespeare’s conclusions about the price of a woman’s uncontrolled pride, ambition, greed, and lust are weighted with heavy condemnation.

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<sup>296</sup> 3 Henry VI, I.ii.248-249.

<sup>297</sup> 3 Henry VI, I.iv.177.

Margaret's fate at the end of the *Henriad* plays presents a challenge to the playwright and audience. Written when Queen Elizabeth sat on the English throne, and acknowledging to an extent, the historicity of the story, Margaret is never held legally or physically accountable for her sins of murder and adultery. However, as Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin argue, Margaret's actions, including the entirely fictional, if brutal, murder of York in Act I of *3 Henry VI*, are motivated by her love for her son Edward, and her determination to protect his royal patrimony. They state, "even the feckless Henry acknowledges that disinheriting his son is an 'unnatural act.'"<sup>298</sup> Margaret's punishment is personal defeat, and the murder of her own son before her eyes. Rackin and Howard add, "the tigerish queen is here so completely disempowered and so firmly repositioned in a feminine subject position."<sup>299</sup> Margaret's punishment, however, renders her with far less than an identity as a disempowered woman. Margaret cannot be executed, but she pays for York, his son, and Humphrey's lives, as well as her infidelity to and estrangement from Henry, nonetheless. In the loss of her throne and family, she is not simply disempowered; she is forcibly cut off from humanity, having lost any identity or claim in society as queen, mother, mistress, or wife. Furthermore, having publicly divorced her husband, she is not even entitled to be a widow.

That Shakespeare would fabricate a murder scene with a female killer for a play ostensibly intent on representing real historical events sheds light on how murderous women

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<sup>298</sup> Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering A Nation*, (New York: Routledge, 1997) 96.

<sup>299</sup> Howard and Rackin, *Engendering A Nation* 98.



might be construed in early modern English society. Shakespeare makes use of common literary conventions for his murderess, but he also consciously creates a figure whose ambition to preserve the throne, first for her husband, and then for her son, ultimately subordinates the very patriarchal structure she militantly defends. Howard and Rackin assert that Margaret is in a contradictory position within the patriarchal structures of family and state, as well as serving as a vehicle for exposing the ideological nature of many of patriarchy's claims.<sup>300</sup> While Margaret's character threatens the patriarchal status quo, it is critical to note that she does so as a queen who is an adulterous murderer. The danger she poses to the throne throughout the *Henriad*, first as a French bride with no dowry, and later as rapacious queen saddled with an ineffectual king for husband, is both underscored and mediated by her identity as a murderer. In scripting a fictional murder scene, the play both illustrates how dangerous uncontrolled violence and sin are in women like Margaret, it also contains her in the identity of an adulterous killer. Thus, in all her sinful monstrosity, Margaret no longer resembles any real historical queen; like her murderous male counterparts Macbeth, Othello, or Claudius, she is a trope of evil personified.

Shakespeare's murderesses in King Lear, Regan and Goneril are, like Margaret, also symbols of rampant ambition, pride, greed, and lust. Regan's relationship to her husband Cornwall is a partnership founded on mutual ambition, while Goneril and Albany's union deteriorates rapidly during the course of the play, driven by mutual hatred, lack of respect, and physical repulsion. Regan and her husband exhibit greed for power. Together they

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<sup>300</sup> Howard and Rackin, Engendering A Nation 85.

brutally maim their host Gloucester, as well as betray Lear. Regan's corrupt character, along with her husband, creates such disorder in the kingdom and her own household that even their servant feels compelled to restrain them from their own ferocity, resulting in Cornwall's death. In outrage Regan stabs the servant to death. The murder is swift and shocking, and, following the graphic blinding of Gloucester, demonstrates the depths of cruel barbarous evil that color Regan's character. While her servant may have violated the rules of rank and hierarchy by resisting his master and mistress, Regan violates the rules of law and nature.

Goneril is both wicked and disloyal to her husband as well as her father. Her marriage is rife with discord that blossoms into animosity and hatred. The honest virtuous Albany considers his wife unnatural and sees her behavior as a profound disloyalty that will ultimately doom her:

That nature which contemns its origin  
Cannot be bordered certain in itself  
She that herself will sliver and disbranch  
From her material sap, perforce must wither  
And come to deadly use.<sup>301</sup>

Albany's fears are well placed; Goneril desires an adulterous relationship with Edmund, and pursues him shamelessly with kisses and favors while she mocks her husband's masculinity. Her lust for Edmund and her willingness to betray her father are clear signifiers of her sinful nature. Accordingly, Albany sees Goneril as unnatural because she does not embody

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<sup>301</sup> King Lear, IV.ii.33-37.

Elizabethan notions of soft, nurturing, compliant femininity. Ultimately, Goneril's desire for Edmund is a betrayal of her husband and marriage that has dire consequences for both lovers. That Goneril resorts to murder, then, should come as no surprise to the play's characters or the audience. It is her victims of course that defy the usual dramatic conventions. Goneril does not murder her husband; she murders her sisters: the virtuous Cordelia, and Regan, her rival for Edmund's affections. At the play's end, Goneril has committed suicide next to Regan's body. As David Bevington argues at the play's conclusion, "the last tableau is a vision of doomsday, with Cordelia strangled, Lear broken and dying, and the 'gored state' in such disarray that we cannot be sure what restoration can occur."<sup>302</sup> Between the actions of these two murderous, deeply sinful women, who are "Tigers, not daughters," Lear's family is destroyed and his kingdom is in ruins.<sup>303</sup>

Greedy ruthless women also populated ballads as well as the stage destroying lives and threatening the peace of the kingdom. A murderous strumpet proves to be the undoing of poor George Barnwell. Although she seems,

A dainty gallant Dame...

Rustling in most brave attire,

her Hood and silken Gown.

Who though her beauty bright,

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<sup>302</sup> Bevington 1171.

<sup>303</sup> King Lear IV.ii.41.

so gloriously did shine,<sup>304</sup>

Sara Milwood is in fact greedy, vain, promiscuous, and treacherous. As the subtitle suggests, during the course of their relationship, Sara persuades George to rob his master and kill his uncle. Professing her love at first, she begs him to stay with her. George is enchanted, but reluctant, and

With that she turnd'd aside

And with a blushing red,

A mournful motion she bewray'd

By holding down her head

A Hankerchiffe she had

All wrought with silk and gold,

Which she to stop her trickling tears

Against her eys did hold.<sup>305</sup>

Using tears, sex, and “wily ways,” Sara tricks her lover into stealing increasing amounts of money until George’s master, “did call to have his reckoning in.”<sup>306</sup> When Sara demands yet more money, George offers to rob and kill his wealthy uncle. After George beats the man to death, they live together, “in filthy sort till all his store was gone.”<sup>307</sup> Eventually they turn on

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<sup>304</sup> George Barnwell 33-78.

<sup>305</sup> George Barnwell 13-20.

<sup>306</sup> George Barnwell 202.

<sup>307</sup> George Barnwell 390-391.

each other with accusations, and both are arrested. The ballad ends with their executions for murder, and a warning to readers: “Lo here’s the end of willful youth, / that after Harlots haunt, / Who in the spoyle of other men/ about the streetes do flaunt.”<sup>308</sup> Sara Millwood uses guile and sex to buy silk gowns and handkerchiefs. George is portrayed as a gullible, love-struck innocent, and Sara is predatory and ruthless. Although this is only one story of a wicked “harlot” and a “poor wretch,” the ballad warns us that women like Sara roam the streets preying on young men. These women may corrupt naïve youths, but citizens like George’s Uncle Grafter in Ludlow pay with their lives.

Annis Dell and Jane Hattersley are dangerous to their communities as well. Jane murders her own children, but the pamphlet’s author states that Adam turns her off, “for that he suspected she made another partner with him in his loathsome libidinous sinne.”<sup>309</sup> Besides possibly corrupting other married men in East Grinstead, Jane repeatedly deceives her well-meaning, kind neighbors. Despite their vigilance, Jane continually hides her pregnancies, and slaughters her infants. Annis also deceives her neighbors for many years before she is arrested for murder. She is not the only murderer in the narrative, however. Before Annis murders little Anthony James she accepts gold and the kidnapped children from a band of thieves. These men and one woman have brutally attacked and robbed the James family, killing the father. The female robber, “the more than monstrous woman,” then turns to the pregnant wife and “ript her by the belly, making herselfe a tragicall midwife, or

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<sup>308</sup> George Barnwell 421-425.

<sup>309</sup> The Bloudy Mother B.

truly a murtheresse, that brought an abortive babe to the world, and murdered the mother.”<sup>310</sup> The murderous thieves are never caught, and although Annis and her son did not murder the James family, they are drawn in as co-conspirators: “they shewed her what riches they had got, and told her they were willing to make her a Partaker therein, onely they craved her advice. How they should dispose of the children.”<sup>311</sup> Annis is eager to share in the stolen fortune, and cold-bloodedly states, “the Boy should be murdered, and his sister have her tongue cut out.”<sup>312</sup> Mr. and Mrs. James are “credible and honest,” and of “vertuous disposition,” and “lived like Abraham and Sara, he loving to her, she obedient to him.”<sup>313</sup> Ruthless cutthroats like the band of thieves, and their cohorts Annis and George Dell, are made all the more despicable for their roles in the destruction of the good James family. In The Horrible Murther, the murderous thieves are described as an itinerant peddler and his wife. In both versions of the story, the murderous women surpass their male counterparts in cruelty and greed. While Annis is hanged for her crimes, the pamphlet’s author cautions readers to remember the peddler and his wife, “are not yet found out, nor is the place and abode of (the) unfortunate Parents not yet known. But yet all in good time, if it be the will of the Almighty both the one and the other shall come to light.”<sup>314</sup> Murderous women like

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<sup>310</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther A4.

<sup>311</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B.

<sup>312</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B.

<sup>313</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther A3.

<sup>314</sup> The Horrible Murther B4.

Jane, Annis, and Mrs. James' "tragicall midwife," are presented as remorseless killers who prey on unsuspecting, innocent men, women, and children.

When women prey on their communities, murder narratives often emphasize the role of neighbors in catching the killers and bringing them to justice. Neighbors are watchful, and suspicious. Frequently neighbors serve as a Greek chorus to the protagonists, passing judgment on the sinful woman living amongst them. In The Apprehension, Arraignement, and execution of Elizabeth Abbot, the murderess herself is never named except in the title, and plays a supporting role to the cast of characters who live next door and across the street from the victim. Mistress Killingworth habitually drinks to excess and is frequently found "wallowing unseemely on the ground in her own soyle."<sup>315</sup> Her neighbors repeatedly find her, bring her home and put her to bed, despite her lack of gratitude. When she persists in drinking and abusing their patience, "as Phisitians do their franticke patients, who not being able to governe them, either by doctrine or perswassion, give them over wholly to their lives destruction...repining to be thus neglected...they left her to bee her owne helpe."<sup>316</sup> Mistress Killingworth, left to her own devices, disappears one night, after a visit from a mysterious acquaintance. However, the active intervention of neighbors discovers her murder, identifies the killer, and brings her to justice. Mistress Killingworth's neighbors, having left her alone, report hearing odd noises from her house, notice the curtains drawn for long periods of time, and wonder at the behavior of Killingworth's strange guest. Ultimately, having discovered

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<sup>315</sup> Unknown, The Apprehension, Arraignement, and execution of Elizabeth Abbot (London, 1608) A3.

<sup>316</sup> Elizabeth Abbot A3.

burned remains in the hearth, they search for her murderer in an effort to absolve themselves from not intervening. After Elizabeth Abbot is arrested for the crime, Mrs. Killingworth's neighbors eagerly participate in her trial, testifying to Elizabeth's eccentric behavior, identifying a dress belonging to the deceased, and tracking down her accomplices in nearby towns. The author of this pamphlet has deliberately shaped the story to stress the importance of neighborliness and community concluding of Mrs. Killingworth's death, "Drunkennes was hir sinne, drunkenness was hir punishment: the neglect of hir neighbours was thir sinne, and their neglect toward hir for that sinne, was an excuse to hir murtherer and a furtherer to hir death."<sup>317</sup> In some murder tales, the community itself becomes a collective active character moving the plot along to its inevitable conclusion.

Sometimes the presence of neighbors lends dramatic tension to murder stories. In The Most Cruell and Bloody Murther, neighbors miss opportunities to save the young children kidnapped by a band of thieves. The narrative relates how a tailor notices the children's distinctive clothing but not their terrorized looks, and a barber surgeon treats the girl who has had her tongue cut out, but does not connect her to her murdered brother after his body is discovered.<sup>318</sup> Another stranger rescues her from a hollow tree where the murderers left her to die.<sup>319</sup> Only when the girl miraculously recovers her speech do these

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<sup>317</sup> Elizabeth Abbot B.

<sup>318</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B, B3.

<sup>319</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B3.



neighbors come forward to complete the story and arrest Annis Dell and her son.<sup>320</sup>

Repeatedly these men and women step into the story, occasionally foiling the murderess, or simply voicing their suspicions. Sometimes, they are a critical presence in bringing the killer to justice. At other times, neighbors rally around the victim: “the towne had an especial charge to provide more carefully for her, and not to suffer her any longer to lye in the streets, and her brothers coate was given to her to weare out.”<sup>321</sup> In plays of kings and queens, neighbors are the nobility and members of the court. Nevertheless, they function as aristocratic versions of the townspeople in murder pamphlets. In King Lear, only the concerted efforts of Kent, Albany, and Edgar, heir to Gloucester, successfully disclose the full extent of Regan, Goneril, and Edmund’s treachery, and put an end to their crimes. At the end of 3 Henry VI, Margaret and her supporters are defeated, her son, the former heir to the throne, is dead, and Margaret is left powerless, friendless, and bereft of her English family and court. The new King Edward, his brothers, and court nobility are assembled on stage. Edward’s speech announces the restoration of the kingdom:

Once more we sit in England’s royal throne,

Repurchased with the blood of enemies...

Thus have we swept suspicion from our seat

And made our footstool of security...

Away with her (Margaret), and waft her hence to France

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<sup>320</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther B4-C.

<sup>321</sup> The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther C.

And now what rests but that we spend the time  
With stately triumphs, mirthful comic shows,  
Such as befits the pleasure of the court?<sup>322</sup>

In Titus Andronicus, with Tamora arrested and his father and family decimated, Marcus pleads to the citizens of Rome:

You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome,  
By uproars severed, as a flight of fowl  
Scattered by winds and high tempestuous gusts,  
O, let me teach you how to knit again  
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,  
These broken limbs again into one body.<sup>323</sup>

As Marcus and his brother Lucius attempt to restore order to Rome, they order a fit punishment for the murderess Tamora. Lucius commands,

As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora  
No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,  
No mournful bell shall ring her burial;  
But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.  
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,  
And being dead, let birds on her take pity.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> 3 Henry VI V.vii.1-44.

<sup>323</sup> Titus Andronicus V.iii.67-72.

The neighbors in these stories unite to capture the murderer, and restore justice to their communities.

Even when they aren't actively involved with the story, however, the presence of neighbors is felt throughout many of these narratives. Women peek in keyholes and spy illegitimate births and illicit sex. Master James' neighbors try to warn him about his wife and her lover Lowe. Both Master Arden and George Sanders' murderers are repeatedly foiled when friends, neighbors, and business colleagues unexpectedly appear and keep the would-be victims company. When Jane Hattersley is seen noticeably pregnant time and time again, yet no babies ever appear, her neighbors begin to follow her, keeping an eye on her activities. When once more Jane displays a large belly, her neighbor Frances Foord enters Jane's house and, hearing strange noises from the bedroom, attempts to enter. Blocked by a locked door, Frances, "marveled, but made no words about it...she went not downe but staid and peept through the key-hole of the doore: through which shee saw Jane set in a wicker chaire by her beds side with a look bewraying very great debilitie and faintness of body."<sup>325</sup> Jane, of course, is in labor, and despite Frances' efforts, the child mysteriously disappears. Another of Jane's neighbors comes upon her as she has just given birth and discovers the baby wrapped in her apron. To prevent Jane from doing away with her child, "five or six nights she was her bedfellow, in which time she perceived her no intent of evill against the

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<sup>324</sup> Titus Andronicus V.iii.195-200.

<sup>325</sup> The Bloody Mother B3.

infant.”<sup>326</sup> After another baby dies, the neighbor women search Jane’s body, and when Jane appears pregnant again, “with a greater circumspection, then before was looked into, many eies attended it to see the event.”<sup>327</sup> Eventually, the pamphlet reports, Jane and her lover argue and neighbors, overhearing their dispute, discover the truth of their murderous activities. Anne Welles is also overheard arguing with her lover John Parker, and her angry confession is then repeated as evidence against her before the magistrates.<sup>328</sup> Sometimes a woman’s bad reputation makes her a likely suspect to her neighbors. Margaret Ferne-seede’s neighbors make note of her inability to cry over her husband’s death, and confirm that she sold all of his possessions before his murder. At the incessant barking of a dog, neighbors track him to a privy where they find Martha Scambler’s dead infant. Some of the same neighbors, “made search of suspected persons and of such who were like to be the murdered Infants mother, or murtherer, amongst many other loose livers and common harlots,” and so discover Martha.<sup>329</sup> Finally, witchcraft pamphlets invariably feature the testimony of neighbors who accuse, testify against, and even physically inspect the witch for signs of the devil’s mark. In all of the narratives, relentless neighborly suspicion, vigilance, and intervention ultimately prove instrumental in discovering and ending the evil taking place amidst the community

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<sup>326</sup> The Bloudy Mother B.

<sup>327</sup> The Bloudy Mother D3.

<sup>328</sup> The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering A4.

<sup>329</sup> Deeds Against Nature B.

In addition to nosy neighbors, murderesses are discovered and identified by incriminating gruesome tokens of the crime. Handkerchiefs, bloody towels, clothes, and even body parts are murder mementos that add shock value and implicate the guilty party. Witchcraft stories frequently feature imps or bewitched animals that deepen the suspicion of neighbors towards a possible witch. Furthermore, a witch was commonly known to have marks like nipples on her body where she allowed her imp to suck blood.<sup>330</sup> In murder stories, bodies may be killed but they leave physical traces, and like Duncan's blood on Lady MacBeth's hands, are tell-tales for characters and readers alike. Plays use this device as frequently and to even greater shock value than pamphlets: Margaret wipes York's face with a handkerchief dipped in his murdered son's blood, while Deflores presents Beatrice-Joanna with a ring still attached to her dead fiancé's finger. In pamphlets and ballads, however, these tokens are not simply graphic prizes presented to other characters, they become active agents of the plot, both underscoring the violence of the crime, and publicly incriminating the murderess. Susan Higges' victim spits on her murderer's face,

Three drops of blood, that never could  
be wiped from that place:  
For after I returned  
Unto my house againe,  
The more that I it washede,

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<sup>330</sup> Macfarlane, "Witchcraft" 73.

It more appeared plaine.<sup>331</sup>

After Elizabeth James murders her maid, burying the body in her garden, a dog digs up the head, “which by the haire of it he carried in his teeth and there before the honest keeper.”<sup>332</sup>

Master Arden of Faversham is strangled with a towel before being stabbed by his wife. Both the ballad and two woodcut illustrations from different editions, prominently feature the towel’s role in Arden’s death. Furthermore, as readers of chroniclers Holinshed and Stow, the Wardmote Book, and Thomas Beard’s 1597 publication of notable murders knew well, the bloody cloth was found beside Arden’s well along with footprints that ultimately linked Ales and her household to the killing.<sup>333</sup> Elizabeth Caldwell’s husband is strangled with a kerchief. It is this cloth, found on his body the next morning, which calls attention to his broken neck. A bloody napkin implicates one of Mr. Trat’s murderers. When the young man pulls it out of his pocket, “imbrued in the blood of the innocent,” a woman asks him, “by what meanes it became so bloody.”<sup>334</sup> Although he buries the cloth, the pamphlet states he grows “suspitious amongst the neighbourhood,” and is finally arrested. Suits of clothing link murder victims to murderers in both The crying Murther, and The Most Cruell And Bloody Murther, while a stolen dress implicates Elizabeth Abbot in the murder of her friend

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<sup>331</sup> Susan Higges 95-100.

<sup>332</sup> Three Bloodie Murrders C3.

<sup>333</sup> Lena Cowen Orlin, Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Orlin conducts an in depth investigation of the Arden case using it to trace “the ways in which the cultural phenomena associated with what we call ‘private life’ changed in the wake of the Reformation. Her location of written accounts of the Arden case was particularly useful.

<sup>334</sup> The Crying Murther C3.

Mistress Killingworth.<sup>335</sup> In these murder narratives, women's crimes leave stains; bloody cloths, rich jewels, and fancy coats are evidence not just of a murder but the nature of a woman's sin.

Sometimes the dead themselves speak to reveal murderers. Jane Hattersley's infants are discovered buried in a garden, and John Beane's wounds bleed afresh when he is brought in the presence of George Browne.<sup>336</sup> Martha Scambler's dead baby is found in a privy near her house, and Margaret Ferne-seede's husband is found in Peckham Field.<sup>337</sup> Rotted, unrecognizable, and abandoned in a strange neighborhood, authorities are only able to link him to his household when they find an indenture note in his pocket. Master Arden's body haunts the entire community with its ghostly presence years after his death: "Arden lay murthred in that plot of ground, / Which he by force and violence held from Rede. / And in the grasse his bodyes print was seene, / Two yeeres and more after the deede was done."<sup>338</sup> Dead babies, bloody handkerchiefs, and bleeding wounds all play critical roles in accusing murderers. Women who murder are always implicated by mementos of death proving one author's claim that,

The grossest part of folly and the most repugnant unto our owne naturall reason  
is to thinke that our hidden abominations can be concealed from the eie of the

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<sup>335</sup> Elizabeth Abbot C.

<sup>336</sup> The Bloody Mother B4; A Warning H.

<sup>337</sup> Deeds Against Nature D; Margaret Ferne-seede A4.

<sup>338</sup> The Lamentable and True Tragedie K2.

Almightie, or that hee seeing our bloodie and crying sinnes, will not either reveale them before his Ministers of publique justice.<sup>339</sup>

Women who murder are not only full of corruption, they also corrupt the lives of others who love them and live near them. Their sins are manifest, and always mark the people and things around them, leaving traces of the violence they commit. In turn, murderous women's sins are always and inevitably revealed: by the neighbors whose suspicions they have aroused, by the bodies they try to bury, or the lovers who betray them. In pamphlets, plays, and ballads, women who murder threaten their households and communities; only the collective actions of neighbors puts an end to the wickedness and brings the murderess to justice.

### The Wages of Sin: Punishment and Redemption

On the cover of her murder pamphlet, Anne Welles is shown being burned at the stake for the petty treason of murdering her husband. Although the flames and smoke surround her, she is not suffering the throes of an agonizing death. She clasps her hands penitently in front of her, as if in prayer. At the moment of her execution, Anne's posture tells us she has repented her crime. Her eyes, however, directly engage the viewer. She is presented as young and attractive, and beneath her white shift, her breasts are clearly and prominently displayed. In fact, although she confesses to murdering John Brewen, the story makes no mention of Anne's remorse. Anne Welles' presentation, from her immodest gaze

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<sup>339</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede A3.



to her plain white shift, the prescribed dress for convicted prostitutes, bawds, and adulteresses, alerts Elizabethan readers to her wantonness.<sup>340</sup> It also speaks directly to viewers, warning them of the inevitable outcome of yielding to temptation and indulging in sin, while enticing them to purchase the pamphlet and read her story.

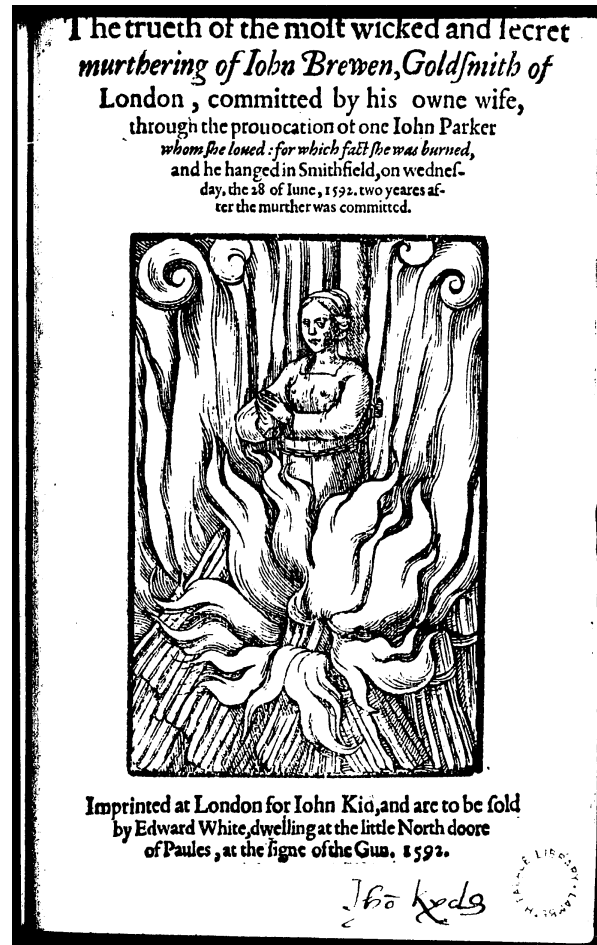


Fig. 4. Anne Welles, woodcut from Thomas Kyd, The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering of John Brewen, goldsmith of London (London, 1592), Lambeth Palace Library, (ZZ) 1594.16.11.

<sup>340</sup> Gowing, Domestic Dangers 40, 105.

In all of the narratives in this group, murderous women are caught, tried, convicted, and executed. Women are accused by neighbors, and implicated with incriminating evidence. They are then convicted and sentenced to death in the assize courts. In some of these stories, the women repent, rediscover their faith in God, and meet death with a clear conscience, cheerful countenance, and a warning to others to avoid sin. Where women repent, they not only claim regret and sorrow for their crimes, they often become defenders of and examples for their sex. Once held as traitors to womanhood, women who murder and repent can now authoritatively warn other wives and mothers to avoid their mistakes. Their temptations and sins are inherently feminine in nature, and they thus serve as appropriate examples warning other women of the dangers that lurk inside them. Both Anne Sanders and Ulalia Page issue warnings, not to the general public, but specifically to other women. When Anne relates her grief, she invites her female readers to participate in her anguished repentance:

Alake I cannot stay,  
myne eyes will not byde dry,  
To thinke what sinne hath brought me to  
out on me wretch, fye, fye!  
Let tender mothers judge  
and gushe out tears with me,  
When as they wey my inward doubt,

and eke my anguish se.<sup>341</sup>

Other pamphlets, however, are directed at both men and women to avoid lives of sin. Thomas Brewer writes, “Such it is, as mothers with wet eyes, and Fathers with grieved hearts may receive: for with the chief of many precedent soul-confounding mischiefs, this may stand to show (with terror) the bloody and most dangerous events of lust and such libidinous living.”<sup>342</sup> Accordingly, murderers in popular texts in this period also often address both men and women. The infanticidal mother Martha Scambler addresses her repentance poem to both sexes: “Both maides and men, both young and old, / Let not good lives with shame be sold, / But beare true virtues to your grave, / That honest burials you may have.”<sup>343</sup> The highway robber and murderer Susan Higges begins her pamphlet lamenting, “To mourne for my offences, / and former passed sinnes, / This sad and dolefull story, / my heavy heart begins.”<sup>344</sup> Susan too holds herself up as an example to both men and women: “Be warned by this story/ you rusling Rosters all:/ The higher that you climbe in sinne/ the greater is your fall.”<sup>345</sup> Murderous women who repent, and warn others to avoid sin by learning from their mistakes, step out of the narratives and address readers and audiences directly. In this way, murder narratives shift their locations from the towns and villages of the stories, to the larger community of the state. Thus, these women’s repentance and atonement through death

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<sup>341</sup> Hyder E. Rollins, Old English Ballads, 1553-1625 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920) 342.

<sup>342</sup> The Bloody Mother A2.

<sup>343</sup> Deeds Against Nature B3.

<sup>344</sup> Susan Higges 1-4.

<sup>345</sup> Susan Higges 121-124.

ultimately reinstates social order for everyone. These women are not subverting society, they are upholding it.

Having vicariously committed murder, English audiences are offered redemption and the restoration of domestic and communal stability. Mistress Turner begs forgiveness of everyone for her part in the murder of Thomas Overbury, asking,

Men let me beg forgiveness from you too,  
Because I did more then shy Sex should doe.  
And you of Modest dames that you beare the note,  
And my black Name quite from your tables blot...  
You Fathers whom of Children I bereave  
You Children whom of Parents I deceave,  
You Wives whom Husbandles my Guilt does make  
Forgive me All of All this Leave I take.<sup>346</sup>

Margaret Vincent, despite having murdered two of her children, repents and,

Her soul no doubt hath got a true penitent desire to be in heaven, and the blood of her  
two innocent Children so willfully shed according to all charitable judgements is  
washed away by the mercies of God.<sup>347</sup>

In the case of Elizabeth Caldwell, while one full page is devoted to the graphic attempted murder of Thomas Caldwell, sixteen pages recount her repentance and redemption. In the

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<sup>346</sup> The just Downfall D3.

<sup>347</sup> A pittillesse Mother B2.

last pages of the text, Dugdale includes Elizabeth's letter to her husband, and her scaffold speech. In these sections, Caldwell demonstrates her renewed faith and expresses remorse for her sins. She is depicted as converting all the other prisoners held with her and speaking to as many as three hundred visitors a day on the evils of sin and temptation. She exhorts all readers to, "Keep the Sabbath, goe to the church, and heare the word of God preached for that was the only truth, and able to save their Soules."<sup>348</sup>

Her letter to her husband is full of remorse, and she beseeches him,

Although the greatness of my offence deserves neither pittie nor regarde, yet give leave unto your poore sorrowfull wife to speake unto you...it is the last favor that I shall ever beg at your hands, and that last office that ever I shall perform unto you."<sup>349</sup>

Later, she is described as, "praying very earnestly for her husbands conversion, and that her children might have the feare of god before their eyes."<sup>350</sup> Despite enduring an unhappy marriage to a withdrawn, absent husband, having a lover, and then attempting her husband's murder, she ultimately resumes her role as a dutiful wife and mother safeguarding her family's souls. In almost all the pamphlets and broadsides of this period, the woman's repentance is finally a demonstration of God's grace, as well as a reaffirmation of social order. Dugdale's readers, having experienced the protracted horror of a gruesome murder

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<sup>348</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse D2.

<sup>349</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse C.

<sup>350</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse C.

attempt, are then treated to a passionate sermon of vigorous Christian piety. When Anne Sanders finally confesses to murdering her husband, and expresses remorse for the crime, the pamphlet's author credits her admission "through Gods good working."<sup>351</sup> Anne then subjugates herself to her husband's brothers and wives, as well as her own children, whom she instructs, "they shoulde feare God, and learne by hir fall to avoyde sinne: she gave eche of those a booke of maister Bradfordes meditations...she subscribed them with these wordes: Youre sorowfull mother Anne Saunders."<sup>352</sup> Like Elizabeth Caldwell, Anne finally performs for her children the actions of a good mother and virtuous woman. Both women, in repenting their sins, are now presented as good mothers who "move them (their children) unto virtue, and stay them from vice," advising, as Elizabeth Grymestone instructs her children "out of her own experience to eschew evil and incline them to do what is good."<sup>353</sup> Women who repent also rid themselves of their sins. Anne's prayer expresses her hope that "by repentance (God) hast put away my sinnes, and throwne them into the bottome of the Sea."<sup>354</sup> Peter Lake describes these texts as serving to titillate readers while simultaneously allowing them the relief of seeing the difference between their sins and those of the narratives' protagonists, thus giving audiences hope for salvation as well.<sup>355</sup> Beyond feeling better about their own spiritual state, women's murder stories offer audiences the experience

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<sup>351</sup> A Briefe Discourse C.

<sup>352</sup> A Briefe Discourse C2.

<sup>353</sup> Becon, Aughterson 113; Elizabeth Grymestone, Miscelanea A3.

<sup>354</sup> A Briefe Discourse D4.

<sup>355</sup> Peter Lake, "Deeds against Nature," 283.

of indulging in sin while also providing vicarious redemption through repentance. This is most obvious in ballads, where singers articulate the murderess's crimes and final remorse. If murderous women are particularly and monstrously evil, their repentance demonstrates the successful containment of that terrible evil.

Words of repentance may not have reflected the actual sentiments of convicted women, and in fact many pamphlets report murderous women who go to their deaths unrepentant.<sup>356</sup> Joy Wiltenburg argues that repentance poems, and last dying speeches are ventriloquised texts that “constructed an emotive persona, not in order to represent the culprit's actual feelings, but to convey what he or she ought to have felt.”<sup>357</sup> Unrepentant criminals may have been reprehensible, but the pamphlets and plays frequently present women who do not express remorse for murdering friends or loved ones. Additionally, some women will repent of a wicked life, but not confess to murder. Margaret Ferne-seede's pamphlet describes her troublesome behavior in prison before her execution, and adds that while she “made great shoue of repentance for her life past,” she also continued to deny killing her husband.<sup>358</sup> Margaret goes to her execution unrepentant even as “the reeds were planted aboute, unto which fier being given she was presently dead.”<sup>359</sup> While the narrator

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<sup>356</sup> Equal numbers of murderesses die repentant and unrepentant in all the texts included here, while three narratives, all pamphlets, do not mention the woman's feelings about her crime: Two most unnaturall and bloodie Murthers, Three Bloodie Murders, and Newes From Perin. These three stories simply conclude with the womens' executions.

<sup>357</sup> Wiltenburg, “True Crime,” 16.

<sup>358</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B3.

<sup>359</sup> Margaret Ferne-seede B4.

of Margaret's story clearly disapproves of her lifestyle and behavior, he or she makes no effort to contrive an ending for her akin to Elizabeth Caldwell, who repents and spends the rest of her imprisonment before her execution trying to save the souls of her fellow prisoners. Furthermore, while some will confess to the murder, they do not articulate any regret or sorrow. Although Anne Welles is displayed in the woodcut praying penitently as she burns at the stake, the pamphlet states, "neither would the woman confesse anything till in the end shee was made to believe that Parker had bewrayed the matter, whereupon she confessed the fact in order."<sup>360</sup> Both Anne and Margaret Ferne-seede resist reintegration into civilized society by refusing to express remorse. While the story's audience might experience vengeance through their awful deaths, most authors do not reward audiences with vengeful details of a woman's suffering. Ironically, Margaret's death at the stake is more dignified than was that of her husband Anthony, whose body was found rotting and full of maggots in Peckham Field. Thus, while some texts include poems of remorse, many narratives simply end with the murderess's confession and execution. Repentance, while desired, is not a critical component to a murderer's final days in popular murder narratives.

Finally, murderers and readers confront execution. This punishment is sometimes represented as a happy and just ending to a horrible incident, and some criminal-protagonists face their fate willingly, even cheerfully. Anne Sanders writes,

I am Full Redie prest,

My Sines I doe Repent,

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<sup>360</sup> The trueth of the most wicked and secret murthering 15.



O for my Blodie fact, o god,  
Lett notte my soule bee shentte!  
“Noe, noe, I am full sure,  
thy promise is full just;  
Christes bloud my bloody facte hathe clenste,  
and thereto will I truste...  
In flower of constant age,  
my dates to end with shame,  
To my immortall blisse and joye  
set free from synne and blame.<sup>361</sup>

Elizabeth Caldwell provides another such example. Her death by burning, surely a horrible and agonizing fate, is nonetheless happy:

singing with a good spirit, that afterwards she uttered that shee felt the merries of  
God, and her soule was much comforted...saying her bodily death did not dismay her,  
concluding with these her last words, Lord Jesus receive my spirit and so left this  
miserable world.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Rollins 346.

<sup>362</sup> Dugdale, A True Discourse B4 ;The usual punishment for petty treason, murdering one's husband, was burning. this crime, linked with Grand Treason against the monarch, was treated much more seriously than murdering one's wife. For more information on petty treason, see J.A. Sharpe, Crime in Early Modern England; Frances Dolan, Dangerous Familiars; and J.S. Cockburn, Crime in England 1550-1800.

Susan Higges proclaims, apparently posthumously, “and to the Jayle convaied, / And at the Sises was condemnd, / and had my just desert.”<sup>363</sup> With these executions, the narratives invariably present a satisfying ending. The criminal meets her fate and accepts it willingly. Because the sinner is assured of redemption, she can accept her death willingly, according to the narratives. However, whether they repent or not, all murderous women are executed for their crimes. With the exception of the murderers who killed Mr. and Mrs. James in the two pamphlet versions of the Annis Dell narrative, every one of the women in these narratives is hanged or burned to death. Moreover, whether her death is happy or not, the murderess’s execution represents a satisfying conclusion for readers and listeners. Benjamin adds, “‘and they lived happily ever after’ says the fairy tale. The fairy tale,...secretly lives on in the story...Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest.”<sup>364</sup> Thus, women’s murder stories end like fairy tales as well. In the murderess’s execution, the community and the kingdom live happily ever after, and the story of triumph over evil is instructive and comforting for audiences and readers. Murder stories plot the path of sin, from the first temptation, to the noose. In these narratives, a woman’s evil is encountered, measured, and eventually defeated by neighbors, justices, courts, and finally, the executioner. Women’s murder stories guide readers and listeners, encouraging them to contemplate their own sins, and, having gained knowledge of wickedness, embrace a life of virtue.

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<sup>363</sup> Susan Higges 116-118.

<sup>364</sup> Benjamin 102.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

On stage in Act I, Lady Macbeth transforms herself into a murderess:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;

Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances

You wait on nature's mischief!<sup>365</sup>

If women “by nature are kinde, flexible, and remorseable,” then Lady Macbeth reminds us as murderers they must reject their sex and humanity, and become unnaturally cruel. The women who kill their husbands, children, and friends in murder stories are constructed as monstrous emblems of evil. A woman who murders exemplifies the wicked proclivities to

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<sup>365</sup> William Shakespeare, Macbeth, I.v.40-50.

which women are prone: wallowing in lust, coveting gold, jewels and sumptuous clothes, and lashing out in murderous rages. Women who murder are also deceitful, and hide their sins behind fair words, and loose clothing. Understanding that her husband is “too full o’ the milk of human kindness,” Lady Macbeth advises him, “Look like th’innocent flower, But be the serpent under’t.”<sup>366</sup> The narratives, however, also caution that those secret sins will always be brought to light, and that neighbors will hear and see, dogs will bark, and wounds will run with telltale blood. Murderous women, then, despite their monstrosity, are inevitably discovered and punished. In women’s murder stories, the texts reassure that justice always triumphs against evil, and order is always restored.

While many early modern women could not easily emulate “a virtuous woman, a dutiful wife when she submits herself with quietness, cheerfully, even as a well-broken horse turns at the least turning,” neither did many slaughter their infants in bed, decapitate young women in their gardens, or poison their husbands with lethal sugar soppes.<sup>367</sup> Murderous women may have behaved as exemplars of vice, but they are as extreme in their wickedness as the virtuous ideals described in the marriage and motherhood treatises. Bernard Capp argues “women frequently sought to negotiate the terms on which (general principles of patriarchy) operated within the home and neighbourhood, seeking an acceptable personal accommodation that would afford them some measure of autonomy and space, and a limited

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<sup>366</sup> Macbeth, I.v.17, 65-66.

<sup>367</sup> Whately, Aughterson 34.

degree of authority.”<sup>368</sup> Murder narratives, like the marriage and moral treatises, also debate the nature of women and sin. All of these women may be monstrously bad, but their stories and sins are not identical. Some are forced into unhappy marriages, some are swayed by manipulative heretics, or seduced by treacherous lovers, and some are taught wickedness or witchcraft by their mothers. Some of the murderesses elicit pity, like Elizabeth Caldwell or Anne Sanders, while others, such as Annis Dell or Tamora, provoke horror and revulsion. Moreover, many of the stories feature women and neighbors who help to identify the murderess, protect children, and warn husbands of adulterous wives. Between the extremes of good and bad women proliferating in early modern literature, women may have found in some of the murder plays, pamphlets, and ballads, not only the means to avoid sin, but also the ability to negotiate the everyday trivia and tensions they encountered with husbands, children, and neighbors.

Like the real crimes that inspired them, murder narratives begin in specific towns like East Grinstead, Acton, Perin, and Plymouth, and they end in specific places as well such as Newgate and Tyburn. Between their beginnings and endings, murderous women travel a well-worn path of iniquity that originates in towns across England, and concludes, as it must, with their punishment and the reestablishment of order at the scaffold. Along the way, these women corrupt lives, destroy households, ruin marriages, and inflict awful suffering on their husbands, children, and neighborhoods. The pamphlets, ballads, and plays that early modern men and women enjoyed locate the evil in specific locations; they also trace the progress of

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<sup>368</sup> Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 25.

sin within individual women from first temptation to last dying breath. Moreover, readers in towns like Perin, East Grinstead, and London also participate in women's murder stories. They are drawn into the murderess's sin, tempted by her lover and share in her desires. When a woman murders on stage or in songs in alehouses, audiences are present, and the stories invite them to contemplate their own sinful natures as well. A murderous woman was a "bloudy Tygris," remorseless, cruel, and steeped in sin, but her story, like the medieval bestiary, was a morality fable warning of the sins known to endanger all men and women.<sup>369</sup> Benjamin writes that a novelist "invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing, 'Finis.'"<sup>370</sup> In their encounters with murderous women on stage, in taverns, and pamphlet stalls, early modern women and men confronted and identified evil, and at the stories' conclusions, these audiences and readers are reacquainted with the grace of God's providence. Murderous women in early modern popular literature provided a means for contemporary men and women to explore, confront, and understand the depths of sin, while anticipating their own spiritual salvation. In these women's murder narratives, stories of unnatural sin, stunning violence, and extraordinary tragedy, early modern men and women invested their ordinary lives with profound meaning.

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<sup>369</sup> The Most Cruell B2.

<sup>370</sup> Benjamin 100.

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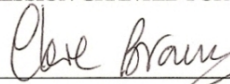
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