"Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers" Female Subversion and Punishment in Early Modern Crime News

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Joy Wiltenburg, the author of *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Culture Crime of Early Modern England and Germany*,[1] was the first scholar who, in the early 1990s, investigated the relation between popular literature and its "powerful and subversive" women protagonists. They were "disorderly creatures" willing to disrupt the carefully constructed social hierarchy of the time, and the prose or verse that depicted them clearly expressed "male anxieties about the success of patriarchal rule".[2]

Academic interest in early modern crime ballads and fiction has increased dramatically since then. From 1990 until the present day, there has been a more focused analysis of this cultural genre, what is more important, the significance of women's offences in a period when, according to Jürgen Habermas, a new conception of public sphere was emerging,[3] has been entirely re-considered.[4] In fact, the idea that

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[1] J. Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Culture Crime of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992).

[2] Ibid., p. 7.

[3] On the relation between the emergence of the public sphere and social authority in Renaissance times, see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Enquiry into a Category of Burgeois Society*, trans. by T. Burger (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

[4] In the last thirty years, scholarly research has established a much closer link between gender-related crimes – petty treason and infanticides – and women's difficult condition in pre-patriarchal society. We shall also consider G. Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); V. McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare's England* (London

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news is not "neutral", as it represents "a signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored",[5] has greatly helped to explain why female crime was instrumental in the construction of pre-patriarchal society.

Of course, continuous research in such a complex area of study has also shown the boundaries and methodological difficulties that scholars still need to overcome. Frances Dolan and Joop Koopmans, for instance, have agreed that the existing writings are far from representing a definite literary corpus,[6] and that there is neither a precise "dating system", nor a convincing "cataloguing method".[7] In an effort to find practical solutions to problems, Malcolm Gaskill has recently urged the academic community to divide those writings into groups or "layers" – there are "normative", "impressionistic", and "administrative" sources[8] – in order to facilitate scientific investigation, and encourage the publication of new, specialized anthologies.[9]

and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); R. Martin, *Women, Murder, and Equity in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2007); R. Hillmann, P. Ruberry-Blanc, *Female Transgression in Early Modern Britain: Literary and Historical Explorations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[5] S. Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1. As for the more specific field of anonymous accounts of crimes committed by women, termed as "strange news, stories of monstrous, prodigious or disastrous occurrencies", see pp. 145-79.

[6] As for Dolan's idea that the newly available databases – Early English Books Online (EEBO), the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), and The Proceedings of the Old Baily – are limited resources as they do not include all the materials that were circulating at the time, see her "Tracking the Petty Traitor across Genres", in P. Fumerton, A. Guerrini, K. McAbee, *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 149-72, particularly 150-1.

[7] See J. W. Koopmans, *News and Politics in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)* (Bristol: Isd, 2005), p. 139.

[8] M. Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21.

[9] Ibid. In fact, there are very few collections, which are currently available. Apart from J. Payne Collier (ed.), *Illustrations of Early Popular Literature*, 2 Vols., London, 1863, we may consider R. Martin, *Women and Murder in Early Modern News, Pamphlets, and Broadside Ballads* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); S. C. Staub, *Nature's Cruel Stepdames: Murderous Women in the Street Literature of Seventeenth Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005); as well as M. Loughlin, S. Bell, and P. Brace (eds.), *The Broadview Anthology of Sixteenth Century Poetry and Prose* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2011), pp. 537-55.

It will take time to systematize texts and knowledge in this field. In the meantime, it is possible to find that anonymous crime accounts have at least two macro features in common: they were designed to offer information about popular court cases, and to give moral lessons. It may be for this reason that their narrative structure was so simple, and that messages were crystal clear: first, there was the introduction of the story, including precise details about the protagonists' past lives and social roles, then there was the "conflict" leading to crime, finally, the "resolution", or their desperate appeals to the "Countrymen of England",[10] and just punishment. In fact, the opposition between Good and Evil – that is to say between the inner experience of "errant emotions" and the rules imposed by public authority[11] – generally resulted in genuine contrition and death, which persuaded readers to live honestly, and to "beare true uirtues to [their] graves".[12]

The strong link between facts and moral conduct in sensational crime narratives could also be found at a linguistic and iconographic level. Although we may only suppose that the authors were men of the Church, or fervent Protestants, the semantic significance of their words was overtly religious, and visuals were meant to empower it. They appeared in the title pages, or in the main body of the texts, and depicted the horror of the main crime scenes. However, there was a special focus on women, who were not only deprived of their names – thus of their social identities – but could always be seen standing near devilish creatures as their tempters.

[10] See Anonymous, *A pittilesse Mother. That most vnnaturally at one time, murthered two of her owne Children at Acton within sixe miles from London upon holy Thursday last 1616. […] With her Examination, Confession and true discovery of all the proceedings in the said bloody accident*, London, 1616, p. 7.

[11] J. Wiltenburg, *Ballads and the Emotional Life of Crime*, in Fumerton, Guerrini, McAbee, *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain*, p. 174.

[12] Anonymous, *Deeds against Natvre and Monsters by kinde: Tryed at the Goale deliuerie of Newgate, at the Sessions in the Old Bayly, the 18. and 19. of Iuly last, 1614. the one of a London Cripple named Iohn Arthur, that to hide his shame and lust, strangled his betrothed wife. The other of a lasciuious yong Damsell named Martha Scambler, which made away the fruit of her own womb, that the world might not see the seed of her own shame: Which two persons with diuers others were executed at Tyburne the 21 Iuly following. With two sorrowfull Ditties of these two aforesaid persons, made by themselues in Newgate, the night before the execution*, London, 1614, p. 7. As can be seen, the spelling here has not been modernized. It will be so for all the other extracts in this paper.

It is clear that the way their "vile offences"[13] were proposed to the reader, particularly the verbal violence against them, reflected the misogynistic *topoi* of pre-patriarchal England. At that time, women were considered the "weaker vessels", and represented either the Biblical sin of Mother Eve, or the moral perfection of Virgin Mary:[14] a contradiction in terms, the idea of promoting "a unified public mind – or better a public heart, committed to peaceful order"[15] entailed harsh attacks against those who defied the truest Christian precepts, thus weakening the foundations of society.

We may continue to consider the main features of crime literature as one of the most popular genres in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England. However, even the contents in those texts suggest that, highly gendered, they symbolized the opposition between female subversion and male oppression both in the private and public spheres.

A Briefe Discovrse Of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers (1583),[16] *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers* (1591),[17] *The Bloudie Mother, or the most inhumaine Murthers* (1609),[18] and *Deeds against Nature*

[13] Ibid.

[14] See among others K. Usher Henderson and B. F. McManus, *Half Humankind. Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); S. Trill, "Religion and the Construction of Femininity", in H. Wilcox (ed.), *Women and Literature 1500-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 30-58; and A. Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel. Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Phoenix Press, 1999).

[15] Wiltenburg, *Ballads and the Emotional Life of Crime*, p. 175.

[16] Anonymous, *A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers, committed bothe in Worcestershire, and bothe happening unhappily in the yeare 1583. The first declaring, how one unnaturally murdered his neighbor, and afterward buried him in his Seller. The other sheweth, how a woman unlawfully following the devilish lusts of the flesh with her servant, caused him very cruelly to kill her owne Husband*, London, 1583.

[17] Anonymous, *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers, lately committed. The first of a Father that hired a Man to kill three of his children neere to Ashford in Kent: The second of master Page of Plymoth, murthered by the consent of his owne wife: with the strange discouerie of sundrie other murthers. Wherein is described the odiousnesse of murther, with the vengeance which God inflicteth on murtherers*, London, 1591.

[18] Anonymous, *The Bloudy Mother, or the most inhumane murthers, committed by Iane Hatterfley, vpon diuers Infants, the issue of her own bodie: & the priuate burying of them in an Orchard, with her Araignment and execution. As also, The most loathsome and lamentable end of Adam Adamson, her Master, the vnlawfullbegetter*

and Monsters by kinde (1614)[19] are only some of the anonymous texts which provide evidence that women only managed domestic spaces, and that their moral choices heavily influenced their social image. In fact, those who could not be considered as good Christians, or even broke the law, were "cruel", "wolvish", and "devilish" creatures, also "Caterpillars of Nature".[20]

What were their crimes at the time, though? Why did they commit them? As documentary evidence and academic research show, they were generally petty treason and infanticides, which questioned their most "natural" roles as wives and mothers.[21] The path that we are about to follow will demonstrate how female agency – in this case, women's capacity to break their tightest family bonds – originated from their desire to express their inner needs, or to defend themselves from severe judgement. Clear reference to the fact that death was the most terrible consequence of their deeds can also be found in the concluding passage of Thomas Kyd's *The trueth and most wicked secret murthering of Iohn Brewen, Goldsmith of London, committed by his own wife*, dated 1592:[22]

> The woman had iudgement to be burned in Smythfield, and the man to bee hanged in the same place before her eyes. This was accordingly performed, and they were executed on wednesday last, being the 28 of June 1592, two years and a halfe after the murder was committed. The Lord giue all men grace by their example to shunne the hateful sinne of murder, for be it kept neuer so close, and done neuer so secret, yet at length the Lord will bring it out; for bloud is an incessant crier in the eares of the Lord, and he will not leaue so vilde a thing vnpunished.[23]

of those vnfortunate Babes being eaten and consumed aliue with Wormes and Lice in July last 1609, London, 1609.

[19] Anonymous, *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by kinde*.

[20] See ibid., p. 4: "[W]ee are [now] to place in our Discourse another Caterpillar of nature, a creature more sauage then a shée wolfe, more unnaturall then either bird or beast, for every creature hath a tender feeling of love to their young, except some few murtherous minded strumpets, women I cannot call them".

[21] See F. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994).

[22] Thomas Kyd's *The trueth and most wicked secret murthering of Iohn Brewen, Goldsmith of London, committed by his own wife, through the prouocation of one Iohn Parker, whom she loued*, London, 1592.

[23] Ibid., p. 6.

1. Murder as rebellion and an escape: Petty treason in provincial England

Street culture as one of the inspiration sources of the highest English literary tradition provides evidence that women murderers had a strong impact on readers' imagination in the Renaissance period. Their actions were perceived as forms of "aberration from 'normal' gendered behavior",[24] which always caused morbid curiosity.

Garthine Walker, the author of *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England*, is one of the scholars who have given precise figures, as well as a clear interpretation line of this particular aspect of early modern culture.[25] She has shown that women offenders only represented a small minority compared to men – 10%-20%[26] – what is more important, they were both perpetrators and victims. Going beyond definite roles and definitions, petty treason in particular expressed their desire to escape from the conventions of marriage and coverture.

The stories in *A Briefe Discovrse Of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers* (1583) and *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers* (1591) suggest that it is essential to understand more about this type of female agency. Written by anonymous authors, they have never been edited or re-published, but deserve the modern reader's attention. They are testimonies of the way feminine violence was depicted in those years, furthermore, they offer a unique representation of provincial England, both at a sociological and cultural level. Corthridge and Testock, for instance, are the two small towns where their stories were set; as for their main characters, they seem to belong to the lower middle classes, and to act according to the beliefs and values of that particular social group.

Rooted in "unlawful" (but true) passion, these little known writings follow the narrative pattern that has been given, and are literally imbued with quotes from the Bible, as well as with verbal violence against their women protagonists. Their final conclusions – punishment and death – represent the lessons that the readers were expected to learn, so that the pre-patriarchal system could be not only maintained, but even reinforced.

[24] Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order*, p. 74.
[25] Ibid., p. 75.
[26] Ibid., pp. 24-5. The data concerning feminine crime are in Table 2.1.

1.1. A Brief Discovrse Of [A] most bloudie murther: "The good Wife of y Howse" as Eve

I praye you looke into these Tragicall accidents following, whiche, albeit they carrye terror sufficient, to forwarne the unnaturall children of this worlde: yet daylie doo fresh enormities spring up, able to urge the verte bowells of the earth, to yeelde foorth fearfull acclamations against us.[27]

Despite the narrator's reference to the "Tragicall accidents following", the starting point of *A Briefe Discovrse Of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers* is a religious definition of happiness. It is associated with "the unitie of Brethen [and] the looue of neighboures",[28] which can positively affect society, but the idea of Christian marriage, together with the representation of "a man and a wife that agree together",[29] are even more important. At this level, the Biblical quotes in the introductory passages – *Ecclesiastes* 25.1 and *St. John* 4.7 – not only highlight the domestic setting of the story, but also prepare the reader for its future developments: Thomas Beast is "an honest Husband" and "one very well reputed among his Neighbours", Christopher Thomson is his "handsome" "servant"; as for "the good Wife of y Howse", who is given no name, she is immediately considered a victim of the "wicked instigation and prouocation of y Deuill".[30]

Centred on the "unlawful" passion between the woman and her "Donker", the short narrative does not provide any information about when their relationship started, or how it progressed: its key element is said to be "lust",[31] which deprives the two characters of any social respect and dignity. It is not by chance that the woman's decision to murder her husband originates from the necessity to put an end to the "rumor of the People":

The Neighbours, not suspecting, but credibly perceiuing, the common and unhonest behauior of this wicked woman [y] her lusty Donker: began so much to dislike thereof as it came at last at her Husbands eares, who as wel

[27] Anonymous, *A Briefe Discovrse*, p. 2.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[31] Ibid.: "Often times they would carnally acquaint them selues together, till lust bad gotten so much power of the Woman: as she began altogether to loathe and dislike her Hvsband, and preferred the fleshly dealings of her new companion so much as she must needs seeke and practice the death of her Husband".

to slake the rumor of the People, as also the pleasure these two unhonestly enioied: gave [the man] warning to auoyd his howse.[32]

"Lust", social pressure, and hatred for the man who has also used his authority to protect his reputation, suddenly transform the "good Wife of y Howse" into a "most horrible and Wicked Woman", "a graceless strumpet".[33] The growing tension leading to crime combines with a full display of the misogynistic *topoi* of the time, yet her choice to offer her lover "mony"[34] to kill is not enough to clarify what could be meant in terms of female agency. In the following extract, after the man has become her accomplice, the woman lucidly chooses the weapon to use, so that her plan will be a success. Now she is more than a devilish creature and a temptress:

[T]he wicked Mistresse misliking the weapon, saying that it was nothing for the purpose, deliuered [the man] a Forest Bil, which she her selfe had made very sharp for y same intent, and said: Be sure to hit him right, and thou shalt speed him I warrant thee, so that he shal neuer tell who did hurt him.[35]

Representing the Biblical sin of Mother Eve, "the wicked Mistresse" goes even further, and finally achieves the result that she has expected. One day Christopher Thomson argues violently with his "Maister", and the conflict scene ends with murder. The narrator's short report – "He stroke at him with the Bil in such a cruel manner, y there he killed him. After the deed was done, he fled"[36] – is clear about responsibilities. There is little or no trace of verbal violence against him, which shows that, in his or her eyes, Thomson has only followed the woman's instructions, thus, he is the other victim in this story.

The same line of thought can be found at the very end of the narrative. The man is taken to prison, where he insists that he had been instigated to commit the crime. Despite the confession, both the two

[32] Ibid., p. 6.

[33] Ibid.: "Oh most horrible and wicked Woman, a womā nay a devill: stop your eares you chaste y grave matrons, whome Gods feare, dutie, true love to your Husbands, and vertue of your selves has so beautified as nothing cā be so odious unto you, then y such a graceless strumpet should be founde".

[34] Ibid., p. 12.

[35] Ibid., p. 13.

[36] Ibid., p. 10.

lovers are "worthily found guiltie and condemned".[37] He will be hung, whereas she – "for an example to all lighte and lascivious women"[38] – will be burnt:

> She was laide upon an hurdle, & so drawne to the place of Execution […]: there being bound to y strake, & the fire made to burne about her, her wicked carkas was soone dissolved into ashes.[39]

Heavily influenced by religion, politics, and moral philosophy, at that time, legal thinking made courts' verdicts unequal[40] particularly for women. Magistrates and juries may treat their cases differently, but certainly agreed that the socio-cultural benefits of the marital status of coverture had to be maintained. For this reason, petty treason was utterly condemned in all social contexts, also in popular literature, for many more years to come:[41] it was the icon of a biased use of Christianity, of stereotyped sex roles, as well as of a gendered form of punishment until 1790.

[37] Ibid., p. 13.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] See M. Fortier, *The Culture of Equity in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 59: "Legal discussion of equity is anything but monolithic: there is as much variation within legal thinking about equity as there is between legal thinking and other kinds of understanding, religious, or political, for example. […] Support for the need for equitable correction of the law arises in a series of thinkers from early in the sixteenth to early in the seventeenth century. It begins with Christopher St German, who is followed by John Rastell, Edmond Plowden, William Rest, Barnabe Barnes and Frances Bacon. Differences of conception among these defenders of equity abound: is equity within or outside the law? Is it with or against the law? Does it limit or fulfil the law? […] What ensues is a rich diversity of understanding even among those who agree on the need for equity".

[41] See Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, p. 22: "Until 1790, the punishments for petty treason were different for murder and drew attention to the crime as a particularly egregious assault on social and political order. Men convicted of petty treason were drawn to the place of execution on a hurdle and then were hung[, whereas] [w] omen […] were sentenced to the same punishment as those convicted of high treason: They were burnt at the stake. In legal theory, then, if not always in practice, the punishment of female petty traitors collapsed the distinction between the two kinds of treason. For women, these capital offenses were not only analogous but virtually the same".

1.2. A true discourse of a cruel and inhumaine murder: In search of true love and freedom

Apart from those techniques which helped the narrator to prevent readers from identifying themselves with the criminals – and possibly follow in their footsteps – it was a common practice for him or her to artfully simplify the key passages of those tragic stories. Their main focus was to condemn the female protagonist's guilt, not to understand the reasons behind it, but in a sense, *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers* (1591), also including *A true discourse of a cruel and inhumaine murder, committed upon M. Padge of Plymouth*, was an exception.

In fact, although the anonymous author seems to use the same narrative pattern, and to put an emphasis not only on the figure of Satan – the "author of evill"[42] – but also on women's condition of inferiority in pre-patriarchal society, the process leading to murder is much clearer, and firmly rooted in the protagonist's domestic environment.

We shall start from background information. M. Glanfeeld is a man of "good wealth and account" and a father, who initially chooses "a yong man named *George Strangwich*" as her daughter's husband, but who suddenly changes his mind.[43] A victim of the devil, according to the external narrator, he informs the young woman that he and her mother have "found out a more meeter match for her" – "M. *Padg*e of *Plimouth*, a widdower, and one of the cheefest inhabitants of the towne"[44] – and that after the wedding, they will all put down roots there. Although she has already "setled her affection upon *Strangwidge*",[45] her duty is to obey her parents, and to comply to their will.

The narrator is clear about the pressure that she has to endure. There is systematic reference to her "freendes",[46] as well as to her father's authority, and at the end, despite her promise "neuer to loue ý man with her heart, nor neuer to remoue her affection setled upon the said Stranguidge",[47] she cannot but marry Mr. Padge.

The idea of murder seems the only possible solution, and, again, the only possible escape from a life and a man that she has been forced to choose. The narrator evokes the ever present opposition between

[42] Anonymous, *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers, lately committed*, p. 7.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., p. 8.

Good and Evil, and insists, as part of the young woman's guilt, that she and Strangwich were together when plotting against Padge:

> Thereupon the said mistris *Padge* did within ý space of one yeer and lesse, attempt sundry times to poison her husband. […] But God […] defended stil ý said M. *Padge* from the secret snares ε practises of present death, which his wife had laid for him, yet not without great hurt unto his body , for still the poison wanted force to kil him, so wonderfully did almighty God worke for him, yet was he compelled to vomit blood and much corruption, which doubtles in the end would have killed him, and that shortlye.[48]

A long and painful process, that of poisoning the man, it finishes when the two lovers decide to hire two servants, Robert Priddis and Tom Stone. They offer them a great "summe of mony"[49] as a reward for murder, and they accept it.

They get into the two protagonists' house on February 11, and the woman takes them to her husband's room. The key passage reads: "Stone flew upon him […], and suddenlye tripped him, so that he fell to the ground: whereupon both of them fell upon him". Of course, they will continue to hit him until "he [is] full dead".[50]

The following sequences are purely narrative. They are centred on the woman's ability to keep her secret, but they lack any information about her life after the crime. No reference is made, for instance, to her inner feelings – that is to say, to her possible sense of liberation and freedom given that her husband has died – nor to the way her relationship with Strangwich has developed. We may consider that as a choice to reinforce the tension within the story, and to draw the reader's attention only to the devastating effects of such a cruel deed.

The murder remains unpunished for some time. It is Mr. Padge's sister, though, who finally "spie[s] blood upon his bosome", "[finds] his neck broken", and goes to the "Maior".[51] The final passages establish a close relation between God's will and earthly justice, as well as clarify the idea of petty treason as a form of subversion against patriarchal authority:

> Thus did the Lord unfold this wretched deed, whereby immediately the said Mistris Padge was attached upon the murther: examined before Sir Francis Drake knight, with the Maior and other maiestrates of Plimouth, who denied

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., p. 9.
[51] Ibid., p. 11.

not the same, but said she had rather dye with Strangwidge, then to liue with Padge.[52]

Death will not be the ultimate form of punishment for the woman. Strangwich proves that he had tried to persuade her not to kill her husband,[53] so the jury releases him. Completely abandoned by her family and her lover, she will be executed on February 20th 1591.

The reader will never know how she died, or how much she suffered. The lesson that *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers* has taught, however, is hard. The young woman's protest and extreme act of rebellion had been brutally repressed. It would always be so for those who chose to follow in her footsteps, or to go even further, sacrificing their children's lives.

2. Subverting the (male) idea of femininity: mothers as new Medeas

Early modern news continued to give space to women criminals, but never really captured the unique and complex features of their stories. Particularly when motherhood as a painful experience was connected with shame, violence, and death.

Randall Martin in *Women, Murder and Equity in Early Modern England* has shown that that branch of popular culture had clear limitations.[54] Despite the wide range of plots and rhetorical styles, facts were (over) simplified, and messages were only meant to promote order and religious orthodoxy. As for their protagonists, they were "obscure women"[55] of ultra-conservative provincial England, who had felt obliged to kill their children to escape from moral pressure, or defend their convictions. The short extract below shows the way they were perceived:

[W]ee are [now] to place in our Discourse another Caterpillar of nature, a creature more sauage then a shée wolfe, more unnaturall then either bird or beast, for every creature hath a tender feeling of love to their young, except some few murtherous minded strumpets, women I cannot call them.[56]

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.: He "offered to proue that he had written a Letter to Plimouth before his coming thether, that at any hand they should not perform the act: neuertheles M. Padge was murdered before the comming of this Letter".

[54] See Martin, *Women, Murder, and Equity*, p. 155.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Anonymous, *Deeds against Nature*, p. 4.

If petty treason generated horror and verbal violence, women who had committed infanticide were victims of a narrative process, which, even at a linguistic level, would finally annihilate them. Of course, it was easy to attack and marginalize such weak members of society. The majority of printed reports suggest that they were unmarried women, generally maid servants,[57] who, because of their controversial relationships, powerfully questioned the very male idea of femininity: far from embodying the ideas of "gentleness, nurturing, motherliness, and passivity",[58] they were considered socially dangerous, thus needed to be punished. It was so with the female protagonists of *The Bloudie Mother, or the most inhumaine murthers of Iane Hatterfley* (1609) and *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by kinde* (1614), who after experiencing deep suffering and loneliness, felt obliged to kill their children not only to defend themselves and their lovers from public despise, but also – paradoxically – to comply to the unwritten laws of patriarchal England.

2.1. Iane Hatterfley, or "the butcher of her own sèed"

In fact, even in *The Bloudie Mother, or the most inhumaine murthers of Iane Hatterfley*, social roles and moral reputation are more than important. Adam Adamsonne is a married man, who "for his […] place and sufficiencie in estate of liuing, [is] in good account and reckoning amongst his neighbours";[59] as for Iane Hatterfley, a servant in his house and his mistress, she is like a new Eve, who can seduce, tempt, and "command".[60] Despite her dream of a future as her master's wife, the narrator's conviction is that the two are committing an "obscure and most foule sinne", which is also the product of Satan's "thick" "cloud" of "secrecie"[61] and "unlawful lust".[62]

Based on the shocking idea that "the ful number of babes they have had cannot be knowne",[63] the concluding passage of the introductory section clearly anticipates the horror of her crimes. Iane Hatterfley is an

[57] On infanticide as a sex-specific offence, and on women's legacy, see Hillmann and Ruberry-Blanc, *Female Transgression*, pp. 129-31.

[58] See A. Laurence, *Women in England 1500-1760* (New York: Hachette, 2013), p. 258.

[59] Anonymous, *The Bloudie Mother*, p. 2.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., p. 4.

[63] Ibid.

"unnaturall mother",[64] who has the ability to conceal her pregnancies – only "loads of woe and shame"[65] – and to kill. Shame and desperation are no excuses for her deeds:

> With that hand that should have tenderly fed [her sweet infant], and giv'n it that should have maintaind the breath, she more then Tyger-like, stopt the breath. O cruell mother, O griefe to mothers, O wretch most wicked, unworthy the name of a mother. Mothers have harts of war that melt and consume in the heate of sorrow, […] [b]ut this wretch had a hart of steele, and eies of marble, so indurate, that no motion of heaven, or sparke of human pitty, could be seene or perceiued in them.[66]

A symbol of female agency and subversion, who derives her immense power from solitude, Iane does not embody any of the traditional ideals connected with femininity and motherhood. Compared to the women criminals in petty treason stories, she is more than a subtle temptress: lucid and in control, she is not afraid to use her own hands to commit murder. The consequences of her choices will be severe by judgment, which will lead to punishment.

Again, the anonymous author carefully selects the pieces of information that readers will need to have. They, for instance, will never know about the relationship that she had with Adamsonne, worst of all, they will never know how she felt before and after she procured death. At this level, we may also understand why *The Bloudie Mother* is based on the same narrative simplification process as early modern street culture. Its moral purpose was to utterly condemn the female protagonist's behaviour.

Adamsonne's involvement in the crime as her only accomplice does not shake the narrator's conviction that she represents evil. In the following extract, after they have murdered their second child, he buries him in the orchard that he will soon sell to "one Edward Duffield". He does not know, yet, but that will be the beginning of the end especially for Iane:

> This infortunate fruite of lust, and unlawfull pleasures, was no sooner borne, but by the hand of the bloody mother it was muthered, and by the cunning of the cruell father, most secretly buried in a graue of his own making, by the side of a Bor tree, in his orchard, which orchard not long after he sould to one Edward Duffield: which done, she presently (to wipe of the staine of

[64] Ibid., p. 5.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

suspicion) stept from her bed (the bed that honnest women cannot stepp from so lightly, neither if they could would, in decencie and womanhood)to her ordinary walkings.[67]

She will have "many great bellies", "but the unhappie loads of them was neuer be seen":[68] Duffield goes to the magistrates to denounce the crimes, Adamsonne will be released, so only Iane will be condemned to the gallows. "Stout and fearlesse",[69] she will die on July 1 1609.

2.2. Martha Scambler: shame, murder, and repentance

This was further evidence that there was little or no judicial equity in early modern England, and that, as Hillmann and Ruperry-Blanc have proved, it was so particularly with gender-related crimes like petty treason and infanticide.[70] As time went on, after the Act to prevent the Murthering of Bastard Children was passed, women in England were even more discriminated: those who were married, thus who could benefit from the legal effects of coverture, were systematically freed, whereas the others were found guilty, and sentenced to death. It goes without saying that marriage as a religious and social institution really made a difference in trials, and that it would take a long time for things to change. The 1624 Act was finally repealed in 1803.[71]

Punishment, however, was only the end of the process. It showed that in Tudor and Stuart times women were not considered as individuals, and that their most dramatic choices weakened, if not even destroyed, the social network of support that they may have been part of, and that that they needed most. Another story of isolation and death, the one that we can read about in *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by kinde* is centred on its female protagonist, Martha Scambler. A "lewd, and close strumpet, a harlot lodging privately neere Bishops Gate in Bedlam",[72] she is said to have spent "her youth in lasciuious pleasures".[73] Although nobody seems to know about her "unwomanly carriage",[74] one day she becomes pregnant and,

[67] Ibid., p. 8.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 10.
[70] Hillmann and Ruperry-Blanc, *Female Transgression*.
[71] Ibid., pp. 108-9.
[72] Anonymous, *Deeds against Nature…*, p. 4.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.

having no husband to couer this her act of shame, and withall fearing the disgrace of the world, by a devilish practise first fought to consume it in her body before the birth, but not preuailing (as God would haue it) shee was forced by nature to deliuer it aliue to the world.[75]

The narration has just begun, and the reader is immediately told what is behind Martha's intentions: she has "no husband to couer her shame", worst of all, "she fears the disgrace of the world". The following sequences put a clear emphasis on her power. Her body and nature are so strong that she does not need any help at the moment of delivery. Again, desperation and solitude are paradoxically perceived as willingness to subvert the norm; as for facts, they are felt to be rooted in Satan:

Her lusty body, strong nature, and fears of shame brought an easiness to her delivery, and required in her agony no help of a midwife which among women seemeth a thing very strange, for not so much as the least child in the house where she lodged had knowledge of her labour, nor hardly was she thought to be with child, so closely demeaned she her selfe, but the deuill we see addes force unto wickednes, and puts a kind of strength to nature in that kind, other wise had se beene discouered in the childbirth.[76]

Completely isolated from her community, and even deprived of any form of female support or solidarity, Martha decides to discard her child, and throws "it downe into a loathsome privy house, therein to give it an undecent graue".[77] From that moment on, the story will follow the same narrative pattern as *The Bloudie Mother*. Going beyond the sharp contrast between Good and Evil, that is to say between God and Satan, the final resolution connects with misfortune. After some time, a man goes into the tunnel where "the murthered Infant lay",[78] and the town's magistrate is informed about the case. Iane confesses her crime, and then is taken to the old Baily the 18th July 1614. Before she is sentenced to death, she repents for her deed, and launches her desperate appeal to the "Countrymen of England".[79] It is in ballad form, but it is in perfect harmony with the prose of popular literature:

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., p. 5.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., p. 6.
[79] Again, see Anonymous, *A pittilesse Mother*, p. 7.

I surely now must tast, / Rewards for my offences past, / And dye for that accursed crime, / That makes me monster of my time. / Both maides and men, both yong and old, / Let not good liues with shame be sold, / But beare true uertues to your graue / That honest burials you may haue.[80]

Martha's genuine repentance is not enough to save her life. A victim of the severe laws of patriarchal England, she has not respected them, thus she deserves to die. It will be so only a few days later, the 21 July.

3. Conclusions

Readers would never know the painful process which had been endured. The moral message at the end was "that no malefactor can escape unpunished",[81] which was over and above all women's individual needs or destinies, and created the main format of crime fiction in early modern England.

Yet, Martha's story, together with those of the women who had challenged the patriarchal ideas of femininity and motherhood, are more than important. Supporting the latest research trends, they suggest that in those contexts roles were blurred, and that women were both perpetrators and victims. Murder, for them, in fact, was the only possible defence against an oppressive, chauvinistic idea of morality, and the only possible way to cause positive change in their lives.

The protagonists in *A Briefe Discovrse Of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers*, *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers, The Bloudie Mother, or the most inhumaine Murthers*, and *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by kinde* tell us more about what were the main implications of their extreme acts of violence. Conveying an uncontrollable – thus destabilizing – image of women's nature and conduct, they generated harsh reactions, both at a social and judiciary level.

Yet, it may be necessary even to go beyond the idea of female crime as a form of subversion, and consider it as women's most powerful expression of self-assertiveness. The image of Mrs. Padge telling the court that "she had rather dye with Strangwidge, then to liue with" her husband,[82] together with that of Iane Hatterfley, defiantly waiting for her execution,[83] are emblematic at this level. It shows – they show –

[80] Anonymous, *Deeds against Nature…*, p.11.
[81] Ibid., p. 8.
[82] Anonymous, *Sundrye strange and inhumaine Murthers, lately committed*, p. 11.
[83] Anonymous, *The Bloudie Mother*, p. 10.

that their inner needs were stronger than conventions, thus, that there were flaws in such a carefully structured society.

Deprived of their names, as well as their rights, Renaissance women could be true rebels, whose paths would slowly lead England to justice and equality. It would take a long time for the Parliament to change direction: significantly after the French Revolution, in 1790, all petty traitors – men and women – were given like treatment; in 1803, the legal effects of coverture were reduced, and even those married mothers, who were convicts of infanticide, were sentenced to death. Of course, that was only the beginning – there was still a lot of work to be done – but those were key years showing that a more thorough understanding of female crime was needed. Such cruel deeds had always been – and continued to be for many more years to come – powerful signs of suffering, fear, and of an aspiration to change.

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