

Women and Crime in the Street Literature
of Early Modern England

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Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England

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Finally, my thanks to Oliver Clark for help through word processing traumas, and to Mike Holmes for all sorts of things which made life better while the book was being written.

Judge you wanna hear my plea, before you open up your court,
But I don't want no sympathy, 'cause I done cut my good man's throat

I caught him with a trifling Jane, I warned him 'bout before,
I had my knife and went insane, the rest you ought to know

Judge, judge, please mister judge, send me to the 'lectric chair
Judge, judge, good mister judge, let me go away from here

I wanna take a journey, to the devil down below
I done killed my man, I wanna reap just what I sow

Oh judge, judge, lordy lordy judge, send me to the 'lectric chair
Judge, judge, hear me judge, send me to the 'lectric chair.

(From 'Send me to the 'lectric chair', by George Brooks,
sung by Bessie Smith, 1927)

Introduction

The women whose crimes are at the heart of this book often went gladly to their deaths on the scaffold or at the stake, like the woman in Bessie Smith's song, cited on p. viii, and did not ask to live longer. But in other ways they were quite unlike her: not only did their crimes never involve 'trifling Janes', but they nearly all expressed the deepest regret for what they had done and, helped by ministers of the Church, they tried their best to make peace with God before they died in the expectation of escaping eternal damnation. Or at least so the reports of their last days on earth would have it. Executions were public events in early modern England, and it was important to the state that they were conducted as spectacles of moral and social edification. The accounts I discuss here are literary representations and, although some of the writers take pains to stress the truthfulness of their version of events in contradistinction to others available, they are not necessarily factually accurate, since they are shaped by other concerns. Whether in the form of ballads, domestic plays or prose pamphlets, these are stories about sensational acts – predominantly murder or witchcraft – rendered the more scandalous because they are acts of deviancy committed by women.

This is not a book about the history of women or of crime. My focus is not on the social reality of these crimes, how and why they were committed, or on women's place within the penal system. It does not seek to measure the accounts against what 'actually' happened. 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. Only unusual crimes were saleable commodities: principally, murder and witchcraft. In a society which conceived of women's roles in terms of their function within a patriarchal system, the woman who committed an act defined as criminal was doubly deviant, infringing the norms of gender and of social order which constructed woman as secondary, inferior and subject to male authority. One of the concerns of the book is to address the part played by considerations of gender in the telling of these stories of women's acts of extreme disorder.

Women as perpetrators of disorderly, evil or criminal acts go back to the very beginnings of Western mythologies, and still today the woman who commits a crime of violence is a figure of fascination, in tabloid terms an 'Angel of Death' perhaps, or a 'Black Widow'. The continuing notoriety in Britain of such figures as Myra Hindley and Rosemary West who enter that exclusive category of serial killers, exemplifies the most extreme example of this; women who allegedly murder their children generate intense media

interest, as websites devoted to the recent British case of Angela Cannings, and in America of Susan Smith, illustrate. In these instances, pathological factors such as mental illness, depression and postpartum psychosis are drawn on to explain what seems otherwise so unnatural in the weaker sex. The extent of women's participation in violent crime has always been a fraction of men's, and is the more intriguing for being exceptional. In early modern England there were also totemic names – Alice Arden, Anne Sanders, Mrs Page of Plymouth, Margaret Vincent, Mrs Turner – evoked to call up that special *frisson* attached to women who kill.

According to sociologists, serious research into female criminality is a comparatively recent development, with much progress still to make, although there is a considerable amount of low-grade popular commentary on the subject. It is also the case that the study of early modern popular literature and culture is a comparatively new area, developing concomitantly with the broadening of interest in non-canonical texts of the period and in history 'from below'. The attitudes of both literary scholars and historians towards the value of exploring the lives, beliefs, work, recreational activities, textual traces and social identities of people who did not participate in the 'grand tradition' of Renaissance culture have changed markedly in the later decades of the twentieth century. Some forms of popular culture from the period, such as ballads and other folkloric forms, have been extensively studied since early in the century, but largely from an antiquarian stance. Scholars such as Hyder E. Rollins and C. J. Baskerville have done groundwork to which all who follow them must be indebted, though their sometimes *de haut en bas* perspectives on the cultural forms they examine qualify and date the aesthetic judgements they made. In the present climate, where boundaries between disciplines are breaking down, historians are becoming conscious of the contribution of popular writing to the study of mentalities to counter the hitherto prevailing bias towards materials relating only to the life and thought of an educated élite. I use the term 'street literature' to refer to broadside ballads and cheap pamphlets available in increasing quantities in this period to a wide audience in streets, markets and public places. An audience of listeners as well as readers is involved; ballads were initially delivered by public performance and circulated orally as much as if not more than through reading. And there is evidence that pamphlet texts, like other kinds of popular print such as jestbooks, were shared communally, or read aloud by a literate member of a group to others. I also include plays on subjects of topical news; although the printed texts of these would not have been available to a broad readership, their substance has a strong degree of overlap with that of ballads and pamphlets on topical news, and would have reached the same kinds of people. In particular, domestic plays served some of the same journalistic functions as ballads and pamphlets, and one of the concerns of my book is with forms of early modern news, produced

and distributed at a time before the existence of newspapers as such. In this context, news does not necessarily mean, as nowadays, accounts of very recent events, but it does refer to events which actually occurred, many of them documented in records of court proceedings, and were regarded by those who read, listened to, sang or viewed their literary representations as contemporary. The events took place in England and were in that way domestic; and although the crimes recorded in these forms were sensational and exceptional, not typical or common, they were perpetrated by common people and thus bore some relation to the lives of their readers and audiences and the cultural formations in which they participated. Such people did not have access to many images of their own lives; but these texts constituted a resource on which they could draw in the construction of social and cultural identities. It is my hope that we can also find in the texts ways to extend our own understanding of those identities.