PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL CHILD HOMICIDE IN ENGLISH POPULAR VISUAL CULTURE 1800-1850

Margaret L. Arnot

Abstract

This article discusses in depth several English illustrated broadsides produced in the first half of the nineteenth century and depicting child homicides. It provides the most detailed analysis to date of the complex interplay of illustration, verse and prose on murder sheets from the period. The cultural representations of homicides of children found in these broadsides contributed in important ways to understandings of culpability for the killings of infants and young children. Rather than simply illustrating the texts on the broadsides, the visual images amplified the emotional resonance of this medium, arguably increasing its effectiveness. In the hands of anonymous, plebeian ballad writers, copy writers, engravers and printers, these dramatic narratives of child killing and the fates of those accused expressed many things that resonated with wider discourse: deep seams of gender hostility, with men sometimes being blamed for women's killings, and women for men's; deep anxieties about the vulnerability of child life in the face of both female and male monstrosity; anxieties about the possibility of madness instigating appalling deeds; rich moral and religious messages about crime and redemption; and strong and complex links between popular cultural understanding and experience and formal legal proceedings.

Keywords: Infanticide; child-murder; broadsides; visual culture; emotions

Introduction

In researching infanticide and child killing in the nineteenth century, I was initially daunted to find on broadsides and in newspapers explicit illustrations of the killing of children and even of mangled infant corpses. Today in Britain we are not accustomed to seeing images of dead infants in the media, apart from those participating in visual rhetoric against warfare, and even these occur only rarely. And the very idea of a graphic illustration of a murdered

---

1 Margaret L. Arnot is Honorary Research Fellow in History, University of Roehampton
m.arnot@roehampton.ac.uk. My thanks are due in particular to the anonymous referees for this journal, whose advice was invaluable. Thanks too to the editors of the journal who have been very helpful throughout the process of getting this work to press. Too many people to name have contributed insights in conference and seminar discussions where I presented aspects of this work. Of particular mention are that SOLON conferences are always a revelation, and colleagues at the University of Roehampton have helped in many ways, not least of course through providing study leave during which aspects of this work were refined.

child is anathema; a taboo against such images even exists in crime drama. This contrasts with widespread representations of other forms of violent death in modern media. Mark Pizzato is probably right when he suggests that spectatorship of death is an inevitable aspect of human culture, from ancient ‘real’ sacrificial rituals, through to screen violence. Through such spectatorship individuals experience ‘fear, suffering and death … vicariously … [and] explore the potential meanings of our own mortality’. This article results from the haunting power of the historical illustrations that demanded explanation; and from curiosity to understand the yawning chasm between the present and the past in this area of visual representation, given continuities in spectatorship of death more generally. My central quest here is to understand what broadsides tell us about the popular mediation and understanding of parental child homicide. The peak of broadside production and readership occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, when a happy coincidence of improving


working-class literacy, advances in printing technology, and the ambition of new entrepreneurial printers created a mass market. They are therefore key popular cultural sources. More particularly, the article demonstrates how images on nineteenth century broadsides relating to child killing were important elements in the social and cultural construction of ideas and emotions about culpability for child homicide. These spoke to deeper anxieties about child life, families, maternal, paternal and social responsibilities for children, community values and personal safety.

I have selected half a dozen illustrated broadsides about the killing of infants and children by parents to analyse at depth. While there was certainly stranger violence against children, and deaths in non-family child-care settings, here I am most interested in how fatal family violence was depicted and understood.


Before explaining my methodology in more detail, consideration of child death and its representation in the nineteenth century helps us understand the broader social and cultural context that contributed to the creation of the violent images on the broadsides. High infant mortality was the norm until the early twentieth century, thus ensuring that nineteenth century people routinely encountered child death in their lives. In the worst cities in the last decade of the century, there were 220 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with a general mortality rate of 18.2 deaths per 1,000 live births. Physical proximity to actual death was part of everyday life, where the bodies of deceased family members would usually be kept in the home between death and burial. Furthermore, viewing the actual murdered bodies of victims soon after death, often in situ, was regular practice for coroner’s court juries, and indeed ordinary spectators would also sometimes scramble to catch a glimpse. Even more alarming than infant mortality rates, at mid-century, 61 per cent of homicide victims were under one year of age. Infanticide and child killing frequently featured in literature. Representations of infant and child death (sometimes violent) in folklore, fairy-tale, ballads, private diaries and letters, religious sermons and texts, theatre, and classical music as well as literature were consequently ubiquitous, though a lot more could be said about them than is available at present. As far as visual records are concerned, there is

---


9 Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, ch.3.


some scholarship on funerary monuments, paintings and photographs. Scholars are yet to address the harrowing illustrations of infant and child killing that are the subject of this paper. Perhaps they were cultural manifestations of a necessary process of coming to terms with the level of infant homicide, yet for historians the images may be ‘messengers from the dark side’ that they prefer not to see.

I examined broadsides related to child killing available digitally on the John Johnson and the Harvard Law School Library collections of Crime and Execution Broadsides. These collections represent eclectic survivals of the many millions of cheap, single page news-sheets that circulated throughout Britain in this period, the crime and execution broadside being one of the most popular genres. Until the removal of the stamp tax on newspapers in example can be seen in Richard Walsh, ‘Why We Wept for Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement,’ Narrative, 5 (1997) 306-321.

14 Nicola Brown, ‘Empty hands and precious pictures: post-mortem portrait photographs of children,’ Australian Journal of Victorian Studies, 14 (2009) 8-24; Erika Langmuir, Imagining Childhood (Yale University Press, 2006) ch.3; Nigel Llewellyn, ‘[An] Impe entombed here doth lie’: the Besford Triptych and Child Memorials in Post-Reformation England,’ in Avery et al. (eds.) Representations pp.52-64; while primarily about literature, Laurence Lerner’s book includes some pithy observations about visual material: Angles and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century (Vanderbilt University Press, 1997); Orme, Medieval Children ch.3; some general art books include useful, brief references: Lionel Lambourne, Victorian Painting (Phaidon, 1999) ch.15


1855, most working-class people could not afford newspapers, and they were far more likely to purchase broadsides that were an important element in working-class culture. Searching the databases on the terms ‘filicide’ and ‘infanticide’ as crime types, 47 broadsides reporting relevant crimes were found (excluding records of gaol delivery which only report the bare details of the crimes). Of these, three are exact duplicates so 44 discrete documents were located. Of these, 20 include pictorial representations. Three include more than one illustration. Eight of the illustrated broadsides are very graphic, depicting the killing of the victim or victims and/or their corpses after death. One broadside, which does not include violent depiction, nevertheless contains three elaborate illustrations linked closely with the narrative in the broadside. One includes a portrait that may or may not have been an effort at realistic representation. While seven of the broadsides are illustrated with stock images of scaffolds, some of these have high production values, and some are clearly related to the executions described in the broadsides. Certainly, a few of the illustrations are mismatched with the narrative or only tangentially relevant, but the overall conclusions that can be drawn from this small sample are that many surviving broadsides about child killing are illustrated, a significant proportion of these contain graphic depictions of killing and/or corpses, and many broadside printers made a significant effort to ensure that illustrations were either especially commissioned for noteworthy crimes, or that stock images were chosen carefully in order to link sensibly with the text.\footnote{Rosalind Crone (Violent Victorians, pp.107-10) notes similar developments in the first half of the nineteenth century: increasingly detailed woodcut imagery on many broadsides reporting violent crime, some of which clearly relates to the crimes depicted, some use of narrative imagery when more than one image is included, including some representations of the condemned prisoner in gaol, really graphic violence on some broadsides, and some use of portraits of both perpetrators and victims.}

Four of the six broadsides discussed in this paper were selected from these searches on ‘filicide’ and ‘infanticide’. The broadsides related to a step-parent case were located by other means because these were not included in searches on these two key terms. This methodological issue does not detract from the overall conclusion that there were many depictions of violence against children on broadsides that demand analysis.

Children die at the hands of adults in all sorts of circumstances. Infants are totally helpless, and young children continue to rely on adult nurture – both physical and emotional – for many years. This vulnerability can lead to death by deliberate murderous assault, by the slow yet relentless accumulation of constant physical abuse, by neglect, and by abandonment. Children suffer criminal deaths at all ages. Historians often distinguish between newborn child murder and the deaths of all children older than newborn. This is
because in England between 1624 and 1803 there was a separate law covering newborn child killing, and a specialist field of medical jurisprudence continued to apply in trials for newborn child murder. There were also particular circumstances underlying newborn child killing that differentiated it from the deaths of older children – in particular, some (usually very young and unmarried) women sought to hide their pregnancies and births in order to avoid discovery of their illicit sexual activity.\(^{19}\) Furthermore, evidence suggests that in the nineteenth century, newborns, at least sometimes, were not actually valued as much as older infants.\(^{20}\) Some of these different circumstances and different responses can be found in the contrast between the single broadside about newborn child killing that is analysed here together with those representing the killing of older children.

The fact that such complex broadsides as those analysed here were not the ‘norm’ does not invalidate their cultural value. As Martin Wiener notes, ‘the cultural imagination of great crimes offers the historian rich texts for interpretation. Chief among such crimes has been murder ... intimate murders have not been simply private affairs but have allowed potent anxieties to be publicly “worked through” in press coverage and in court ... [offering a window] into influential developments in society and culture’.\(^{21}\) Selecting outstanding examples for analysis has a rich analytic pedigree.\(^{22}\) This article is microhistorical because in my view such studies are necessary before better clarifying ‘a lively narrative of continuity and change’ in affective life in Britain as it impacted all forms of violent family crime from the early modern to the modern world.\(^{23}\)

---

19 This point is covered in much of the historiography of infanticide noted later. For introduction see in particular Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus’; Mark Jackson, New-Born Child Murder: Women, illegitimacy and the courts in eighteenth-century England (Manchester University Press, 1996); Anne-Marie Kilday, A History of Infanticide in Britain c. 1600 to the Present (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).


Analysing these broadside images matters for several reasons. Law was in the nineteenth century a field characterized by intense emotional contradiction, and still is. The combination of the images and the texts on these broadsides has particular emotional resonance, confronting us with the absolute centrality of emotions to the politics of criminal justice processes, and more specifically, to understandings of culpability for child killing. While law is often associated with a kind of distant, dry rationality, these sources explode a rich variety of emotions associated with law, in particular pity, compassion, shame and vengeance. Historians, philosophers and literary critics are critiquing the concept that law is an entirely rational domain, and debating the role of disgust, shame, remorse, revenge and vengeance, anger, empathy, compassion and forgiveness within the legal domain. These developments rest on convincing philosophical arguments dismantling dualistic notions of the relationship between emotions and intellect. The forensic examination of broadsides in this paper contributes incrementally to this scholarship, while also adding the very important dimension of the visual image. A team of legal scholars considers the ‘emotional appeal’ of images and their ‘communicative power’ to be fundamentally linked and related to the fact that ‘the first perception of the image is a non-verbal one’. Despite certain scholarly reticence to address images in legal circles, related to the myth of law’s special rational

---

24 Susan Bandes (ed.) The Passions of Law (New York University Press, 1999); Nancy E. Johnson, Impassioned Jurisprudence: Law, Literature and Emotion, 1760-1848 (Bucknell University Press, 2015); David Nash et al., Cultures of Shame: Exploring Crime and Morality in Britain 1600-1900 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Martha C. Nussbaum, Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice (Oxford University Press, 2016); Martha C. Nussbaum, Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law new edn (Princeton University Press, 2015). Recent general historiography on emotions highlights the significance of understanding how pity, compassion and shame were constructed and understood historically: Ute Frevert, ‘The History of Emotions,’ in Lisa Feldman Barrett et al. (eds.) Handbook of Emotions 4th edn (The Guildford Press, 2016) ch.2. Historical scholarship on infanticide has developed detailed understanding of the centrality of shame to this crime and its understanding, which will be considered later.


status and the association of the visual image with the non-rational, the theoretical perspective of Christina Spiesel and her colleagues is gaining considerable sway, and a steady trickle of historical scholarship in diverse fields addresses the power and influence of images concerned with crime and law. The images analysed in this essay draw us immediately to the heart of the powerful emotional element in understandings of parent responsibility for infant and child homicide, linking the domains of intellect and emotion, and popular and legal culture.

As emotions and images are at the centre of this analysis, the remainder of this introduction considers these in more detail. The first issue to address is ‘the vexed question of what, exactly, emotions are’, and how they work. What is certain now is that biological determinists are simply not correct: emotions have many histories. At the historical moment studied, Wordsworth noted the enormous importance of words themselves, "not only as symbols … of passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion." Scholars of the history of emotions continue to stress the great significance of different and changing emotional lexicons in understanding this history and the in-depth analysis of language undertaken here acknowledges this importance. But there is more to

27 Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead have explained this succinctly: ‘Art is assigned to imagination, creativity, and playfulness, law to control, discipline, and sobriety’. Costas Douzinas et al., ‘Introduction,’ in Costas Douzinas et al. (eds.) Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law (The University of Chicago Press, 1999) p.3.


it than language and emotions are not only social and cultural constructs: they are human experiences that ‘interact in a dynamic way’ with emotional expression (in words, facial expressions and bodily gestures, dance, art, music and many other ways besides). Central to understanding the power of broadsides is the psychological observation, taken up by historian William Reddy in developing his theory of emotions, that ‘[t]here is … some clear evidence that choosing to express an emotion or to cognitively rehearse it may intensify or even create the actual experience of that emotion.”

The cognitive rehearsal of emotions was stimulated powerfully by the multi-media quality of the broadsides, which in turn ensured the very real experience of emotions amongst the broadside consumers. The most complex crime and execution broadsides contained many sections – a verse, prose accounts, perhaps a confession, perhaps a letter from the prison cell, and one or more images. As Miriam Jones notes, ‘it is possible to read the seemingly careless heterogeneity of broadsides as eloquent in their own terms; indeed, to think otherwise is to assume that broadside printers were illiterate or amateurish, and they were neither’. Broadsides were usually sold by patterers, who spoke or shouted words from the broadsides in the streets to attract buyers, or chaunters who actually sang the ballads in the streets for the same reason. After purchase the sheets were read aloud, and gatherings of people at times either sang or chanted the verses printed on the broadsides. Anthropologists, literary critics, musicologists, art critics and historians have noted the emotional resonance of multiple forms of non-verbal communication such as poetry, music, art and drama.

We have already noted the significance for emotional response of both words and images, but the presence also of verse and song is likely to have heightened affect. As ‘audio-visual-textual’ media, broadsides were the ‘multi-media’ of nineteenth century culture and modern scholarship on the powerful interaction between film and emotion is surely relevant when considering the relationship between affect and expression in the nineteenth century broadside.

---

32 William Reddy provides thorough background to the divide between scientific research premised on alleged biological givens and anthropological research that focuses entirely on cultural construction, and the quotation here comes from his effort to develop a theory beyond the dualistic impasse: William Reddy, The Navigation of Feeling, quotation from p.xii.
34 Jones, ‘Fractured Narratives,’ p.119.
I expect many of these broadsides did actually get wet. Thomas Dixon’s work on the history of tears in Britain provides important context for this essay, and it certainly demonstrates tearful times extending through the period studied here. Overall though, Dixon’s work focuses primarily on the personal accounts of well-known figures, together with ‘more reflective writings, whether in the form of literature, philosophy, science, or journalism’, revealing ideas about weeping. By documenting the rivers of tears running through the crime and execution broadsides studied, this article corroborates and deepens Dixon’s insight that tears were a crucial element in nineteenth century justice, tied closely to experiences of mercy and pity. These emotions remained tied to urgent questions about the fate of the soul of the accused for the working-class consumers of broadsides as much as for educated, elite characters such as Mr Justice Willes. These publicly experienced popular cultural sources suggest that the tearful courtroom he describes for the Road Murder case was not bounded by the walls of the court house, but extended not only into the homes of newspaper readers, but also into the public houses, the streets, humble dwellings and lodging houses where broadside consumers lived and played.

This work contributes to the history of emotions in another important way. Much work to date delves into specific emotions, such as love, anger and fear, yet most scholarship on revenge focuses on the ancient, medieval and early modern worlds: revenge in modern Britain requires much more consideration. Revenge is vital in consideration of these broadsides in

38 Dixon, Weeping Britannia, p.9.
39 Dixon discusses Willes’s weeping and eventual suicide within complex cultural contexts, including continuing religious discourse about weeping, but does not extend the analysis of tears, justice and pity to wider culture: Dixon, ‘The Tears of Mr Justice Willes,’ pp.16-23. The religious context is also discussed in Dixon, Weeping Britannia pp.69-80.
41 The focus in this note is on the history of emotions more likely to be linked to violent crime and criminal justice. Terry K. Aladjem, The Culture of Vengeance and the Fate of American Justice (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Joanna Bourke, Fear: A Cultural History (Virago, 2005); Peter Gay, The Cultivation of Hatred: The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud (W. W. Norton, 1993); Timothy Gorringe, God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, violence and the rhetoric of salvation (Cambridge University Press, 1996); David Konstan, Pity Transformed (Duckworth, 2001); Michael Laffan and Max Weiss, Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective (Princeton University Press, 2012); Fiona Mchardy, Revenge in Athenian Culture (Duckworth, 2008); William Ian Miller, Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honour, Social Discomfort and Violence (Cornell University Press, 2000); William Ian Miller, An Eye for an Eye (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Nash et al., Cultures of Shame; Barbara H. Rosenwein (ed.) Anger’s Past: The Social uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages (Cornell University Press, 1993); Thomas J. Scheff et al., Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts (Lexington, 1991); Carol Zisowitz Stearns et al., Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America’s History (University of Chicago Press, 1986); Peter N. Stearns, American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety (Routledge, 2006); Peter N. Stearns,
two respects. First, violent crime motivated by revenge features here, and consideration of responses to such crimes needs more nuance than is yet achieved in historiography on nineteenth century violence. And second, the broadsides feature a striking, constant tug of war between harsh judgement or vengeance, and pity or mercy. Legitimation of the criminal justice system itself depended on popular understanding that the scales of justice were appropriately balanced between vengeance and mercy and these broadsides illustrate complex negotiation of that balance when considering different crimes of violence against children.

My determination to understand the images contrasts markedly with the work of most other scholars who have studied crime and execution broadsides from this period. Overall, these popular cultural sources have not received enough attention from British historians, and those who have studied them, have tended to favour textual analysis over the illustrations, or noted them only in passing. The notable exceptions here are Thomas Gretton, V. A. C. Gatrell, and Rosalind Crone. Gretton highlights technological developments in engraving techniques and print technology that enabled more detailed broadside imagery to be printed especially from the 1820s. His most important interpretive point, taken up at depth in this

---

42 Timothy Gorringe highlights how vengeance was a critical component of ideas about the right functioning of the criminal justice system during the nineteenth century: God’s Just Vengeance esp. ch.8. The ‘new retributivism’ justifies the role of revenge in modern criminal justice; see for example Charles K. B. Barton, Getting Even: Revenge as a Form of Justice (Open Court, 1999). Extra-legal ‘vigilantism’ today is actually the modern manifestation of community surveillance and policing that pre-dated formal legal systems as key elements in modern states, and lived on alongside them throughout the period covered by this study. See for example Conley, The Unwritten Law ch.1; E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common (Merlin, 1991). For an interesting suggestion requiring more research, that very low conviction rates for child killing in Carmarthenshire could be explained by juries being satisfied with the ‘justice’ dealt by community moral policing, see R. W. Ireland, ‘Perhaps my Mother Murdered Me’: Child Death and the Law in Victorian Carmarthenshire, in Christopher Brooks et al. (eds.) Communities and Courts in Britain 1150-1900 (Hambledon, 1997) pp.229-44. There is no integrated analysis for the nineteenth century of responses to revenge-motivated homicide and the retributivist element in the criminal justice system itself.

43 For example: Kate Bates refers to pictures on broadsides as ‘decorative illustration’ and avoids their analysis claiming, wrongly, that ‘much emphasis has been given to woodcut illustrations of broadsides’: ‘Empathy or Entertainment?’ p.6; Ellen O’Brien extracts the ballads alone and writes about ‘the poetics of murder’ in her Crime in Verse. See also: Richard D. Altick, Victorian Studies in Scarlet (W. W. Norton, 1970); Chassaigne, ‘Popular representations of crime’; Clark, Women and Crime; Judith Flanders, The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime (HarperPress, 2011); Fumerton et al. (eds.) Ballads and Broadsides, chs. by Simone Chess, Frances E. Dolan, Thomas Pettitt and Joy Wiltenburg; Jones, ‘Fractured Narratives’; Kalikoff, Murder and Moral Decay; Walsh, Domestic Murder; Joy Wiltenburg, Disorderly Women.

44 Crone, Violent Victorians; Gatrell, The Hanging Tree esp. ch.5; Gretton, Murders and Moralties.

45 Gretton, Murders and Moralties pp.14-5. See the wider literature on popular printed images in this period for further detail and implications: Patricia Anderson, The Printed Image and the
article, is that the ‘crucial task’ of the broadside images was ‘the triggering of associations and the arousal of emotions’, though he fails to analyse how this actually operated in particular broadsides.46

In *The Hanging Tree* (1994) V.A.C. Gatrell made a notable contribution to thinking about at least some of these illustrations. His consideration of the emblem of the scaffold on broadsides and in popular prints is cited widely by scholars.47 Gatrell recognizes the ‘symbolic charge’ of woodcut illustrations of the scaffold. They ‘connected their perusers with the psychic energy of the execution. They … offered the crowd its only visual mirroring of itself as well as of the scaffold’s emblematic power’,48 and again: ‘however rough, [the image] might stand for the sensations which the executions released’.49 Gatrell agrees with Gretton that these broadside images of the scaffold had a powerful emotional appeal: but he goes further by suggesting that broadside buyers wanted to capture emotional memory through possession of the material object.50 Yet after his powerful writing about scaffold imagery, by implication, Gatrell wrongly dismisses the significance of other images when he repeats the common view that ‘[w]oodcuts … were appropriated without regard to local topography or credibility’.51

More recently, Rosalind Crone has taken a detailed and serious look at other elements of illustration on broadsides.52 She is persuasive about the links between the broadside imagery and a wider popular culture of violence, but fails to analyse the emotional work of

---

47 Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree* pp.156-96.
49 Ibid, p.177.
51 Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree* p.158.
52 Our agreement on the general trajectory of the development of broadside imagery on broadsides representing violent crime was noted earlier.
The hesitancy of many scholars to consider broadside images at depth may arise in part from lack of clarity about how to analyse the relationship between words and images. Recent scholarship exploring visuality in nineteenth century Britain contains important clues as to how we might proceed. As Kate Flint and others have argued, ‘[t]he Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing’, and this research indicates that this included fascination with seeing infant corpses. The following extraordinary passage from the first medical treatise about infanticide at the beginning of a cultural panic about infanticide in the 1860s demonstrates in textual form the desire to tame the spectral infant corpse through vision, at the same time constituting this spectre in powerful, melodramatic and imaginative detail:

... the feeble wail of murdered childhood in its agony assails our ears at every turn, and is borne on every breeze. The sight is horrified as, day after day, the melancholy catalogue of murders meets the view and we try to turn away the gaze in the hope of some momentary relief. But turn where we may, still we are met by the evidences of a widespread crime. In the quiet of the bedroom we raise the box lid, and the skeletons are there. In the calm evening walk we see in the distance the suspicious-looking bundle, and the mangled infant is within. By the canal side, or in the water, we find the dead child. In the solitude of the wood we are horrified by the ghastly sight; and if we betake ourselves to the rapid rail in order to escape the pollution, we find at our journey’s end that the mouldering remains of a murdered innocent have been our travelling companion; and that the odour from that unsuspected parcel too truly indicates what may be found within.\(^{57}\)

Through a ‘frenzy of the visible’ this passage highlights its opposite: deep-seated anxiety about the invisibility of newborn child murder, together with passionate desire to achieve knowledge through vision.\(^{58}\) This passage also illustrates the porous and shifting boundaries between visuality and textuality that has been explored by a number of scholars both theoretically and in the specific context of nineteenth century culture. All agree on the necessity to employ ‘mechanisms of visual and [textual] interpretation, in order to show how the interaction between pictures and words produces meanings’.\(^{59}\) If we add the ‘verbal’ or ‘aural’ element of broadsides into the picture, we can imagine how the readers, viewers, listeners and singers of broadsides contributed to the constitution of meanings and values


gleaned from the rich interplay of image, text, verse and music within the context of common cultural and social norms of the time.\(^{60}\)

Those accused of the homicide of infants and young children in the nineteenth century fall into a few clear categories defined by their relationship to the children, with important consequences for responses to these alleged crimes. Categories related to parental killings form the structure of the paper: first, a maternal killing of a toddler where the mother was variously represented as monstrous and mad; next, a killing of two young children by a step mother, where vengeful motivation resulted in no mercy; third, a newborn child murder by a very young unmarried woman; fourth a murder/suicide perpetrated by the father; and finally a child killing by a father and his second wife, step mother to the deceased child. The conclusions of this article suggest that the cultural representations of homicides of children found in these broadsides contributed in important ways to understandings of culpability for the killings of infants and young children. Rather than simply illustrating the texts on the broadsides, the visual images amplified the emotional resonance of this medium, arguably increasing its effectiveness. It seems clear that it was not only the crimes against the children *per se* that garnered emotional responses, but also the alleged perpetrators of the crimes. The identity of the accused, the nature of their intimate relationships with other adults who potentially played roles in the child’s death, and the motivation for their violence, including emotional motivation, all were integral to cultural understandings of culpability. In the hands of anonymous, plebeian ballad writers, copy writers, engravers and printers, these dramatic narratives of child killing and the fates of those accused expressed many things that resonated with wider discourse: deep seams of gender hostility, with men sometimes being blamed for women’s killings, and women for men’s; deep anxieties about the vulnerability of child life in the face of both female and male monstrosity; anxieties about the possibility of madness instigating appalling deeds; rich moral and religious messages about crime and redemption; and strong and complex links between popular cultural understanding and experience and formal legal proceedings.

1 Monstrous and Mad Mothers
While much scholarship about infant murder in the nineteenth century focuses on the ‘humanitarian narrative’ about poor, seduced and ashamed maidens and their ‘lenient’ legal treatment for allegedly killing their unwanted infants, particularly newborns (more of that later), there is also a figure of monstrous maternity that haunts nineteenth century representations. Indeed, the parallel discourses of shamed innocence (a particularly young

\(^{60}\) Unfortunately it is not possible to analyse the musical element of the broadsides in this article because I do not know the tunes used, or if indeed the verses were sung rather than spoken.
woman as ‘good’, passive victim) and monstrosity (a woman who is ‘bad’ and actively murderous) can be seen as cultural projections of a primal psychic split between the internalized ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother, posited by Melanie Klein.\(^{61}\) Certainly, the monstrous mother has been a subject for contemplation in myth, literature, theatre, and fairy-tale since ancient times, and was an important component in the cultural fantasy of witchcraft. Furthermore, modern media critics have considered the persistence of monstrosity in representations of women committing violent crimes against children to the present day, including the ways in which the ‘dichotomy between “good” and “bad” women … serves as a means of patrolling, controlling and reinforcing the boundaries of behaviour considered “appropriate” for all women’.\(^{62}\) Then and now, child killing is intricately tied up with deep emotional elements in life: love between couples who are the parents of the child; love for infants and children; threats to life from vulnerability; maintaining the social fabric through reproducing the species; harmony of home; reputation of the family; and sacredness of the mother/infant bond. A woman who kills a child in her care both betrays her bond with the child, her social responsibility, and her covenant with nature, or God, or both, to nurture the child. She has transgressed way beyond the pale and as such is contemptible. Yet in the eyes of some juries and commentators, and since Infanticide legislation in England and Wales of 1922 and 1938, in the eyes of the law, many women who kill newborns or small infants are also victims: young, seduced and abandoned, at the mercy of their bodies and

---

\(^{61}\) This split and its complex manifestations is central to Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theory. See for example some of her earlier work for the initial development of the notion: *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works 1921-1945* (Vintage, 1988). Other scholars have suggested in different ways that the cultural construction of monstrosity in female criminals has its roots in deep psychological structures: Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime* 2nd edn (Sage, 2011); Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Culture: Contemporary States of Mind* (Polity, 1998).

their weak minds, and economically vulnerable. While a terrible example to other women, in many cases such women are seen to deserve pity, and sometimes to deserve legal exoneration or mitigation on the grounds of mental illness. While Cathryn Wilson suggests that ‘the boundary between “sad” and “mad” was not always clearly defined in cases concerning murder of a child, indeed, sympathy for female defendants was often a result of these boundaries being merged’, I would suggest that even cases such as that represented in the broadside discussed next, perpetrated by women who initially seem incontrovertibly “bad”, could be complicated by blurred boundaries. This bundle of contradictions was based on deep-seated fears, fears of the social fabric breaking down, fears of women’s sexuality, fears of strong women, fears of murderous mothers: what strength and fortitude a woman must have to kill her child! The culpable, monstrous mother manifested in representations across the nineteenth century in three main ways: the cruel mother; the heartless stepmother; and the baby farmer, although for the purposes of this paper about parental child homicide I focus on two cases representing the first two types of monstrosity.

We are told in the broadside in Fig. 1 below, referring to an 1828 Somerset case, that Sara Mitchel, wife of a labourer, was imprisoned and awaiting her trial for theft in Shepton-Mallet Bridewell. She was permitted to take her seven-month-old infant into prison with her, as

---


64 Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’ p.30.


66 ‘Particulars of a mother murdering her infant child by dashing out its brains and her confession of killing another child in the same manner’ (T. Birt, Printer, Seven Dials, n.d. [dated on John Johnson website c. 1824-1841; My dating from record linkage about the case: 1828]) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Broadsides: Murder and Execution folder 7(9). Online, durable URL: http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:jjohnson:&ft_dat=xri:jjohnson:rec:20080811120525kg [Accessed 19 October 2015]. Image published with permission of ProQuest and Bodleian Library. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest as part of the John Johnson Collection www.proquest.com. Note: in quoting from broadsides I retain the original spelling and I avoid the use of [sic]. The indictment lists her husband’s occupation in a ‘mason’, a higher status trade: The National Archives (TNA) ASSI 25/20/21, No. 11, ‘An Inquest taken at Shepton Gaol the 17th of May 1828 on Joseph Mitchell’ Assizes: Western Circuit: Indictment Files. FELONIES. Som. Her name in the indictment and various newspaper reports is spelt Sarah Mitchell, but I retain the spelling on the broadside in this discussion. All archival documents referenced in this article are held by TNA.
was common practice. The rough yet powerful image depicts her in the very moment she seizes her child to kill it. Its dynamism provides the image with a dramatic and horrific narrative: the next moment will see the infant’s head smashed against the bedstead.

![Image of Mitchell Broadside](image-url)

**Figure 1: Mitchell Broadside**

---

The image works closely with and amplifies the prose text that commences: ‘It seldom falls to our lot to record a crime attended with so much cruelty’, a ‘dreadful’ murder.68 The image depicts a dark, enclosed space, the darkness standing visually for the darkness of the deed being depicted. Mitchel’s face is set and determined. Her breasts are exposed above her laced corset, a prominent nipple adding to the terrifying narrative – perhaps, just a moment before, she had been breastfeeding her baby. Her exposed breasts emphasise the monstrousness of her maternity, while the exposed body of the infant grasped upside down highlights its utter helplessness, and points toward the gross exposure of its innards occasioned by the mother’s smashing its head against the iron bedstead. The text of the moralizing prose fills in the gory details, describing ‘the little skull being broken to pieces, and the brains scattered upon the ground’, making a ‘mangled corpse’ for the Coroner and jury to inspect.69 The prose further reports that Mitchel confessed to the prison keeper that she had killed another infant about two years previously in the same manner, and that no one knew she had done it.70 His ‘horror’ was matched by the ‘horror’ that filled the coroner’s jury as they inspected the mangled corpse, heard the case and returned a verdict of ‘wilful murder’. Widespread newspaper reports of the same coroner’s hearing are much briefer and matter-of-fact: it was left to the broadside to communicate the horror.71

---

68 ‘Particulars of a mother murdering her infant child by dashing out its brains’.  
70 The status of this confession is obviously dubious and it may well have been made while insane. The likelihood of a death from such violence going unnoticed was small. 
71 Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, 26 May 1828; Royal Cornwall Gazette, 24 May 1828; Jackson’s Oxford Journal, 24 May 1828; The Examiner, 25 May 1828, p.348; The Morning Chronicle,
Yet the message of the broadside is not so simple. Despite her ‘dreadful’ deed, and ‘theft of a quantity of silver plate from the house of a gentleman’, she was an ‘unfortunate woman’, ‘a wretched woman’; the broadside claims that she committed the crime ‘in a fit of insanity’ caused by her ‘drinking a great deal of spirits’ and that her lack of demonstrated remorse ‘shewed the dreadful disorder of her mind’.72 There is also a certain dynamism in the image, including the flying hair, that has some resonance with the powerful Romantic vision of female madness painted by Swiss artist Henri Fuseli, that gained wider circulation in Britain through printed reproductions.73 Insanity was also the explanation favoured at her Assize trial when she was found not guilty on the grounds of insanity and committed until his Majesty’s pleasure was known.74 The same conflicted message of horrific monstrous motherhood with a subtext of compassion is embodied in the verses on the sheet, offering an additional response to the reader:

O Listen to the horrid tale,  
And shed a pitying tear,  
How Sarah Mitchel did of late,  
Destroy her infant dear!  
A Labourer’s Wife—she might have toil’d,  
To earn her daily bread,  
But slighting honest means, she now  
Awaits a judgment dread.75

Thus the verse invites the reader, or listener, to feel pity for the woman who is no longer able to live a properly feminine, domestically ordered life. This call to pity in the first stanza mirrors prose references to her as ‘unfortunate’ and ‘wretched’, and contrasts with the

23 May 1828; The Hull Packet and Humber Mercury, 27 May 1828; The Newcastle Courant, 31 May 1828; The Standard, 23 May 1828. Page numbers are given in newspaper references when they are visible on the digital databases employed in research, but they are often omitted in the scans.
72 ‘Particulars of a mother murdering her infant child by dashing out its brains’.
74 Bristol Mercury, 26 August 1828.
75 ‘Particulars of a mother murdering her infant child by dashing out its brains’.
parallel visual and textual narrative of monstrosity. Yet after describing the murder, the voice of the verse shifts back to merciless judgment:

A Thief before—no mercy now
Could look with pity mild,
Since to her crime is added thus,
The Murder of her Child!76

Yet, in the last stanza, the verse again implores readers and listeners to try to imagine the wretchedness of the woman, and to pray for her:

What must this wretched woman feel,
What pity can she crave,
Whose bloody hands have rashly sent,
Two Infants to the grave!
Ye Mothers dear, that Children have,
And can their crime controul,
Weep for those helpless babes, and pray
For the sad Mother’s soul!77

This last stanza is remarkable for the explicit statement of the deep fear underlying cultural representations of monstrous motherhood: that all mothers have within them the power to kill their infants.78 While the tears of the reader and listener were summoned on behalf of the mother at the beginning of the verses, by the end, their object shifts to the ‘helpless babes’ and, the ‘sad’ mother is presented as in need of prayers.

The role of broadsides in normative religious discourse has been emphasised by other scholars, and the call to prayer is also consistent with the formulaic involvement of the Devil in criminal acts still contained within indictments at this time: ‘not having the fear of God before her eyes but moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil’, Mitchel committed her monstrous act.79 The encouragement of weeping links closely with some actual courtroom scenes. With reference to the courtroom during the brief 1865 trial of Constance Kent for murdering her brother, in 1865, Thomas Dixon suggests that ‘the ritual power of the occasion itself, and its dramatization of narratives of sinfulness, justice and death as much as any psychologically identifiable emotional response, … was productive of tears’ shed by those in the courtroom, including the judge, the accused, the defense counsel, the jury and

76 Ibid.
77 ‘Particulars of a mother murdering her infant child by dashing out its brains’.
78 Bloch, ‘So the Witch Won’t Eat Me’.
the public. Dixon also emphasises the religious signification of tears in nineteenth century Britain, the Bible offering ‘templates for crying at one’s own sinfulness, lamenting over the evils of the whole world, shedding tears of ecstasy or dread in response to God or the Devil, and weeping in pity and compassion’. There were many interrelated contexts in which connections between weeping, religion and crime were made in this period, including court rooms, scaffolds and in scaffold crowds, pulpits, literature, medical texts … and the popular literature of the street, such as this broadside about Sara Mitchel. A dread of the monstrous mother, so powerfully communicated through the graphic image, and of the disturbance to domestic order caused by her act, pity and sorrow for her defenceless victims, and compassion for the dramatically and terribly failed mother came together in the tears summoned by the broadside, not only expressive of emotion but also of a ‘complex set of cognitive and cultural responses to the world’. We will see the significance of tears in some of the other broadsides discussed below.

While at one level it could be argued that an attempt to distinguish between ‘bad’ and ‘mad’ child-killing mothers was central to the nineteenth century judicial process, the Sara Mitchel broadside beautifully encapsulates the cultural ambivalence with respect to these women and thus I write about the ‘bad’ and the ‘mad’ together. It was often the case that acts of child killing by mothers were just so inexplicable that the only avenue that seemed open to judges and juries was to advise and deliver insanity verdicts which avoided the death penalty. The significance of these verdicts for understanding outcomes of trials for child killing by both single and married mothers during the nineteenth century has been discussed by various scholars. The association between madness and maternity was of course not new. The belief that women’s bodies affect their minds in unique ways is as old as scholarly

81 Ibid, p.16.
82 Ibid. p.23.
medicine itself. The ancient fantasy of the empty womb as a wandering animal that could cause ‘hysteria’ as it bumped painfully into organs far from its rightful place became embedded in medieval and early-modern scholastic medicine.  

Child-birth itself was recognized by medieval and early-modern women as carrying great psychological risks. Modern scientific medicine gave the womb more permanent visceral moorings, however, the power of the gravid womb, and women’s reproductive bodies more broadly, also generated much creativity, fantasy and fear historically, and the permanent moorings given to the womb by modern medicine did not eliminate notions that women’s bodies could unseat their reason. In fact, as scholarship cited immediately above indicates, during the nineteenth century, women with recently born infants were considered a special group, less responsible juridical subjects who required unique law to deal with their situation. This notion was not captured in any statute law until the Infanticide Act 1922, but was reflected in dead-end debates about legislative change, and in legal cases. In about 90 cases of over 700 alleging the murder and manslaughter of children up to the age of 7 heard before the Old Bailey 1840-1880, an ‘insanity defence’ was used. I use the term broadly in the way Joel Eigen defines it in his 1995 study of madness and mad doctors in the English Court between 1760 and 1843. I have singled out cases where any witness, the accused or any questioning of witnesses, or indeed the defendant themselves, called into question the mental state of the accused at the time of the alleged crime. Such ‘defences’ were often attempted in cases where the children killed were older than newborn, and the mitigating offence of concealment was unavailable on a murder indictment. In many trials where some sort of ‘defence’ of insanity was broached the women’s bodies almost seemed to speak for themselves through a language of female bodily sensation and popular understandings of unbalanced human behaviour. There were apparently quite loose standards for testing mens rea in many of these cases where women perceived to be vulnerable killed their infants. My argument that the act of a married woman – such as Sara Mitchel – killing her child was so

84 Laurinda S. Dixon, Perilous Chastity: Women and Illness in Pre-Enlightenment Art and Medicine (Cornell University Press, 1995); Helen King, Hippocrates’ Women: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece (Routledge, 1998); Rebecca Kukla, Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).


87 These cases have been extracted by manually reading through all the relevant volumes of the Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, as a more accurate way of finding all the relevant cases than using the search tools in the Old Bailey Proceedings Online. See Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ ch.5. When I cite from the Old Bailey Proceedings Online I use the spelling of the original source (available online in facsimile) thus avoiding digitization errors.

88 Eigen, Witnessing Insanity.
outside the bounds of common understandings of femininity that such killings were often considered mad per se is supported by other historians.\textsuperscript{89} So with such cultural perceptions, it is not surprising to find lay witnesses in the courtroom telling stories of madness which exonerated women. The effect of this on the result of trials on murder indictments for the murder of children older than newborn was marked. In the 40 years from 1840, before the Old Bailey, 34.9 per cent of women tried for killing their young children were found either insane on arraignment, or not guilty on the grounds of insanity.\textsuperscript{90} These narratives of madness and trial outcomes are underpinned by a thread of visual representations of ‘mad’ women committing monstrous crimes, of which the Mitchel broadside is an early example.\textsuperscript{91} But not all monstrous mothers were considered mad.

On 31 January 1848, Harriet Parker, a slender, freckled, dark-haired woman in her thirties, five feet one inch tall, stood before the bar at the Old Bailey charged with the murder of Amina Blake, aged seven, the daughter of her partner Robert Blake. She had also murdered Amina’s brother Robert, aged five, but was not tried on that indictment. This was a passionate, vengeful murder of her stepchildren, carried out while Parker was consumed with jealousy caused by the philandering behaviour of her partner, with whom she lived in an adulterous relationship.\textsuperscript{92} This was a truly Medeaesque crime overlaid with the stepmother

\textsuperscript{89} Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ ch.5; Hilary Marland argues that by the later nineteenth century through development of the medical diagnosis of puerperal insanity, the risk of infanticide was seen as an integral element of femininity: Marland, \textit{Dangerous Motherhood}, ch.6; Pedley, “A painful case”.

\textsuperscript{90} Recent work by Jade Shepherd and Cathryn Wilson highlights the significance of insanity verdicts for fathers who killed their children in the last half of the nineteenth century and this will be considered later: Jade Shepherd, “One of the Best Fathers until He Went Out of His Mind”: Paternal Child-Murder, 1864-1900,” \textit{Journal of Victorian Culture}, 18 (2013) 17-35; Jade V. Shepherd, ‘Victorian Madmen: Broadmoor, Masculinity and the Experiences of the Criminally Insane, 1863-1900,’ unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2013; Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’

\textsuperscript{91} There are a number of relevant images published in the \textit{Illustrated Police News}, a popular newspaper launched in 1864 that continued the graphic tradition established by broadside images, but with increasing levels of detail because of the more sophisticated technology used to create the images. There were other short-lived illustrated crime newspapers, and non-specialist newspapers sometimes carried crime illustrations, which await comprehensive analysis. Scholarship focusing particularly on newspaper representations of child murder in England includes: Goc, \textit{Women, Infanticide and the Press}; Gregory, “Most Revolting Murder”; Grey “Agonised Weeping”; Wilson, ‘Mad Sad, or Bad?’ On sensational reporting of violent crime more generally a good place to start in what is now a fairly extensive literature is Crone, \textit{Violent Victorians}.

\textsuperscript{92} Extensive evidence about this provocation was given during the Old Bailey trial, but it had no effect on the final verdict, though Parker was ‘strongly recommended to mercy by the Jury, in consideration of the unparalleled provocation under which she perpetrated the crime’. \textit{Old Bailey Proceedings Online}, (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 10 July 2017), January 1848, trial of HARRIETT PARKER (t18480131-641). In \textit{Men of Blood} Martin J. Wiener notes that jealousy was often successful as a partial defence to spousal murder. Of course Parker took out her jealousy on children, which probably made all the difference, but this does highlight that jealousy has yet to find its British historian. In early modern France, Natalie Davis has found that jealousy was used by some peasant women (but not men) in their appeals for pardons for crimes, suggesting different gendering of jealousy compared with nineteenth-century England: Davis, \textit{Fiction in the Archives}. For the USA see Stearns, \textit{Jealousy}. 
trope that generated complex cultural expressions in broadsides, newspapers, a pamphlet, the *Old Bailey Sessions Papers* and unpublished legal papers. At issue were Parker’s perceived monstrosity, her sexual transgressions, her jealous emotions and vengeful actions, her cruelty, and the possibility of her redemption. When the evidence concluded, the jury took little time to deliver a guilty verdict, the judge returned the death sentence, and three weeks later, Harriet Parker was executed on 21 February 1848 at Newgate.

In one sense, Parker’s execution for this appalling double murder was unremarkable. Murder at this time was the main reason people hanged. In 1848, 60 individuals in England and Wales went to the gallows, all of them for murder.93 While executions were certainly no longer the regular events they were in the early years of the century, they were still an established aspect of social life in Britain. Fewer of those executed were women than men, and by 1848, there was increasing criticism of capital punishment; the execution of women for some was particularly indefensible and in that year, Parker was one of only two women executed.94 So Parker’s femininity and the fact that she was hanged for murdering young children are both noteworthy, because a higher percentage of men charged with this crime were hanged than women, and more women than men were likely to be found insane for the murder of children older than newborn in nineteenth century England.95 Her counsel’s effort to raise an insanity defence was not taken seriously and despite her diminutive appearance, Parker was perceived as monstrous in many ways.

---

93 ‘Tables showing the number of criminal offenders for the year 1848’, *PP*, 1849, No. 1081, Vol. XLIV, pp.51-129 (Note that there seems to have been a pagination error by clerks at the time handwriting numbers onto the original, so it is best to use its internal pagination to find specific items. See p.8 within document and digital image 8).
94 Ibid. On increasing concerns about corporal and capital punishment of women, see Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*; ‘Report of the Capital Punishment Commission’.
95 Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus’.
The broadside in Fig. 2 makes this point powerfully with a crude woodcut depicting the moment of death.96 A woman is throttling a child, one hand round its neck and the other clenched into a fist. Her face is set in a cruel scowl, brow furrowed, mouth down at the

corners. The younger brother lies awake in the bed, witnessing the death of his sister, the witnessing broadside consumer thus drawn in to the terror of the child. The graphic image makes public the gruesome private murder and orchestrates the emotions of the consumer through both the representation of monstrosity and of the horror of witnessing the crime. The broadside’s emotional impact is strengthened by the unusually detailed scaffold image of the execution of a woman at the top of the broadside. The ballad confirms both the violence of the murders and the dread of execution:

She cruelly his children killed;  
How dreadful to unfold!  
She pressed her hands upon each mouth,  
And left them dead and cold.

It was ‘such a deed we seldom read, / So horrible and true’, and her death upon the tree ‘a dreadful sight to see’ after ‘[t]he dreadful bell will sound her knell’. Yet the overall message of the verses condemns Parker, shames her for her adulterous relationship, for her cruelty towards the children, for the immense suffering she has caused to the mother of the children, and for her dreadful expression of ‘deep jealousy’. The moral lesson is a warning to those reading and listening:

Good folks of each degree;  
Old and young, I pray beware  
Of cursed jealousy.

Jealousy is directly tied to revenge in the discourse. The Old Bailey Minutes of Evidence indicate that Parker herself was acutely conscious of her desire for revenge both before committing the crime, and afterwards when she told a police constable that she committed the crime to revenge the father. In the verses on the second broadside discussed at depth here (Fig. 3), Parker’s voice exclaims ‘Revenge was sweet—when I deprived / The pretty little babes of breath’.

97 This type of representation of witnessing violence is quite common on broadsides. On the interesting emotional dynamics set up by this position see: T. J. Clark, The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing (Yale University Press, 2006); Moira Peelo, ‘Framing homicide narratives in newspapers: Mediated witness and the construction of virtual victimhood,’ Crime, Media, Culture, 2 (2006) 159-75.  
98 Gatrell, The Hanging Tree ch.5.  
99 ‘Life, trial, confession and execution of Harriet Parker’.  
100 Ibid.  
101 The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, (18480131-641). This evidence was repeated in some of the cultural sources too.  
102 Trial, sentence, & execution of Harriet Parker, who was executed this morning, in front of the Old Bailey for the wilful murder of Amina and Robert Henry Blake, in Cupid’s Court, Golden Lane, St. Luke’s’ (Birt, Printer, 39 Great St. Andrew Street, Seven Dials, n.d. [1848]) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Broadside: Murder and Executions folder 11(12).
Blake and Parker’s illicit sexual relationship was seen as the basis for the vengeful crime and full blame for the relationship was placed on Parker. This was despite the fact that according to the cultural sources, Blake was cheating on a living wife while Parker’s husband was dead. In verses on the second broadside, ascription of blame to Parker is strengthened by its expression through Parker’s own voice:

With Robert Blake I got acquainted,
And daily caused pain and strife,
Often I false tales invented
To take him from his lawful wife;
I by m cruel false inventions
Caused him from his wife to part,
Tore the children from their mother,
And left her with a broken heart. 103

Of course Robert Blake was an equal party to the relationship, and as father was the lawful
 guardian of his children and thus entitled to take them wherever he wished, but these
 niceties found no place in the vilifying discourse about Harriet Parker that rested on the
double standard of sexual morality prevalent at the time. The centrality of sexuality to
women’s reputation has been highlighted by Shani D’Cruze and Lucia Zedner, and D’Cruze
and Louise Jackson have made direct links between perceived sexual transgression and
increased culpability in homicide cases. 104 It is therefore no surprise that Parker was blamed
for the relationship.

The enormous difference in the role of tears in the Parker broadsides when compared with
the Mitchel sheet is noteworthy. Examining the first example in detail (Fig. 2), we find that
although the verses dwell persistently on emotions of dread, ‘sorrow, grief, and shame’,
pain, despair, agony, and jealousy, they do not call forth tears from the consumer. That the
crime was too horrendous for tears is also implied in the prose of the broadside where in an
alleged letter from Parker, she writes: ‘The heart of man can hardly pity us: only one shed a
tear on my misery at my trial, and that was Mrs. Moore’. 105 The pathetically tiny petition file
housed in the Home Office records in the National Archives provides moving evidence of the
broad public acceptance of Parker’s monstrosity. The Home Office did not receive any
petitions for mercy for Parker before her execution, except her own petition sent on her
behalf by the Ordinary of Newgate. 106 One brief petition was received from an Irish doctor
after her execution. Parker was thus sexually incontinent, monstrous and vengeful, her dry-
eyed case one where almost nobody felt compelled to weave a defensive narrative in legal

103 ‘Trial, sentence, & execution of Harriet Parker’. A very similar message is given in the verses on
another broadside: ‘The life, trial, confession and execution of Harriet Parker,’ in which she is
represented as a victorious huntress – ‘I hunted him both day and night’ and ‘Soon Robert Blake I
overcame, / And I confess I was to blame’.
104 Shani D’Cruze, Crimes of outrage: Sex, violence and Victorian working women (UCL Press, 1998)
Shani D’Cruze et al., Women, Crime and Justice in England Since 1660 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)
pp.58-60. See also Grey “Agonised Weeping” for discussion of Louise Masset case in 1900 where
illicit sexual activity contributed to the jury’s lack of sympathy; Frost, ‘Motherhood on Trial’. Frank Mort
adds class into the picture, suggesting that at this time excessive sexuality was seen as fundamental
to working-class immorality: Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral Politics in England Since 1830 2nd
105 ‘Life, trial, confession and execution of Harriet Parker’.
106 TNA HO 18/244/44, Home Office: Criminal Petitions, Series II.
terms that would save her life. But were there any sympathetic or redemptive messages about Harriet Parker that served to ameliorate her monstrosity?

There are two key issues for consideration: feminine and religious redemption, which were closely tied together. Parker’s indictments charged that ‘not having the fear of God before her eyes but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil’, she choked and suffocated the two children.\textsuperscript{107} The extent of religious narratives in this case indicate that at mid century, without any convincing evidence of insanity and with incontrovertible evidence of vengeful pre-meditation, supernatural explanation for the motivation remained important. The Evil One still stalked the world searching for vulnerable souls and once Parker had acted under his influence, she needed redemption. Evidence given before the Old Bailey, and repeated in some cultural sources, suggests that Parker herself may have said before committing the crime “you shall find a complete Devil in me”.\textsuperscript{108} One of the many broadside ballads about the case has Parker’s voice pleading: ‘Satan why dids’t o’er though tempt me / To commit that fatal deed?’\textsuperscript{109} A remarkable, anonymous fourteen-page account of Parker’s journey between imprisonment and execution, probably written by the prison visitor, survives.\textsuperscript{110} The bulk of it is devoted to a detailed spiritual biography of Parker, detailing the parts of the Bible studied with the visitor, and her wavering journey through self-doubt to religious conviction and thus, to salvation.\textsuperscript{111} If to some at least only possession by the Devil could explain Parker’s crime, newspapers and broadsides delighted in the traditional tale of penitence which Parker’s behaviour apparently told.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{107} TNA CRIM 4/343/35 and TNA CRIM 4/343/37, Central Criminal Court: Indictments. I have not yet traced when this language disappeared from English indictments.
\textsuperscript{108} Old Bailey Proceedings Online, (t18480131-641); ‘The trial, sentence, and execution of Harriet Parker, who was executed at the Old Bailey this morning, for the wilful murder of Robert and Amina Blake’ (Birt, Printer, 39, Great St. Andrew Street, Seven Dials, n.d. [1848]) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Broadside: Murder and Executions folder 7(20).
\textsuperscript{109} ‘Trial, sentence, & execution of Harriet Parker’.
\textsuperscript{110} Anon., A Record of One Under Sentence of Death (Macintosh, Printer, 1848). The letter was also printed in a number of newspapers and on three of the four broadsides studied: John Bull, 12 Feb. 1848, p.108; The Era, 20 Feb. 1848, p.16; ‘Trial, sentence, & execution of Harriet Parker’; ‘Life, trial, confession and execution of Harriet Parker’; ‘Life, confession, and execution of Harriet Parker, for the murder of Amina and Robert Blake (n.p., 2&3 Monmouth Court, Bloomsbury, n.d. [1848]) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Harding B 9/3 (201).
\textsuperscript{111} V.A.C. Gatrell discusses similar eighteenth-century narratives of the penitent condemned and their usefulness for evangelical proselytizing: Gatrell, The Hanging Tree, pp.375-82. This is obviously a genre with a long history: St Augustine, The Confessions, 4th century, available in many modern editions e.g. (Penguin, 2002).
\textsuperscript{112} John Bull, 21 February 1848, p.124; The Times, 22 February 1848, p.7.
The close relationship between discourses of religion and femininity is evident in another extraordinary record, a letter ostensibly written by Parker to her partner, and reproduced in many broadsides and newspapers. It was allegedly written from Newgate on 7 February 1848, two weeks before her execution. Cross-referencing between sources suggests that this letter was probably genuine. While she represents herself as a reformed woman, deeply contrite in relation to the suffering she has caused Robert’s wife, Parker also admonishes him for his desertion of his wife and begs him to return: ‘Be warned Robert, and remember that those who break the sacred tie pledged at the alter of God will never prosper’. She asks Robert to pray for her ‘that when the bitter cup has passed, I may be received by Him who drank a more bitter one than mine to save us all’. She implores him to ‘sometimes shed the tear of pity and forgiveness over my unfortunate lot’, noting that only one person has shed tears of pity on her behalf.\(^{113}\) At the same time she forgives Blake all his wrongs to her and takes comfort from her trust that the children she murdered are in heaven. The extraordinary ending to the letter lends credence to its being genuine. She outlines a list of small debts that as a good housekeeper she wishes Blake to pay on her behalf – to the milk-woman, to ‘Bridget’ and “Mrs. Washington’ for work done for her, and the greengrocer for coals. And finally, she wants him to fetch her ‘marriage lines from Mrs. Mears’ and to enclose it in his letter of reply to her.\(^{114}\) Whatever the rest of the world may think of her, she wishes to die in the knowledge of her own respectability symbolized by her marriage certificate and her assiduous attention to financial probity.

Reincorporation from a vengeful monster devoid of ‘natural’ feminine care back into the fold of normal femininity was part of the religious narrative. The journey of spiritual redemption, which Parker chose to take in the weeks before her execution, probably helped her survive the dual terrors of memories of her crime and anticipation of the violent ignominy soon to befall her on the scaffold. The script for the journey was widely available in the culture – she might have read this conventional story in crime and execution broadsides related to other prisoners, but more likely, had absorbed it from popular oral culture.\(^{115}\) The narrative required rejection of sexuality outside the bounds of marriage and pursuit of appropriate domestic activities. She is represented as accepting blame for her sexual transgressions, exhorting Blake to live a sexually moral life, instructing repayment of her domestic debts, and reclaiming her marriage certificate. The work of the prison visitor and the Reverend Ordinary of Newgate with the condemned can be seen as brilliantly summed up in the

\(^{113}\) ‘Life, trial, confession and execution of Harriet Parker’.

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Gatrell The Hanging Tree, ch.4.
synecdochic ‘pair of cuffs’ which Parker knitted Blake as a gift before she died.\textsuperscript{116} Having committed the most horrifying and de-sexing crime imaginable to society Parker sought Blake’s forgiveness through a token of her traditional womanly textile skills, given together with the Good Book.\textsuperscript{117} As Tennyson wrote, ‘Man for the sword and for the needle she …’: her redemptive journey saw her return from violence to her needle.\textsuperscript{118} What is certain is that Parker was aware that her life and transgression were being made public through the high profile case and her reported words and actions indicate a conscious scripting of herself within the norms of femininity: an assertion of agency within a very circumscribed existence.

To return to maternal monstrosity, there is an uneasy, underlying tension in both the broadsides and the prison visitor’s pamphlet about Parker that mirrors the transparent fear expressed in the Mitchel broadside that all women have the potential to murder their children. In religious terms, the prisoner visitor quotes 1 John 3:15, exhorting the reader: “Whosoever hateth his brother \textit{is} a murderer.”\textsuperscript{119} Any reader who has hated, who has expressed anger, harboured ‘hard thoughts’ or been unkind – that is, every reader – is according to the prison visitor in equal need of redemption through Jesus Christ as Harriet Parker needs to be saved.\textsuperscript{120} The focus on how easily Parker had been led astray, by failing to attend Church, reading novels instead of the Bible, and giving way to her sexual urges, together with the rather alarming quote from 1 John, stirs anxiety that such a creature of unbridled, violent passion could lurk amongst one’s closest acquaintances. The same suspicion of lurking monstrosity is reinforced by its visual communication in the second Parker broadside reproduced here (\textbf{Fig. 3}). This includes a prominent alleged portrait of Harriet Parker.\textsuperscript{121} Parker appears as an ordinary woman, reasonably well dressed, quite attractive with a long neck and the dress a bit down on one shoulder. This is not overall a vampish image, though the exposed shoulder could be visual code for her sexual transgressions. However I would suggest that the overall message of the image is that an ordinary woman can commit these ghastly crimes. The very act of giving Parker a human

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{The Times}, 22 February 1848.
\textsuperscript{117} On the continuing importance of the gift binding the social fabric in modern society see Jacques Godbout, \textit{The World of the Gift} (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998). It could be argued that there was also an element of moral vengeance behind this particular gift.
\textsuperscript{119} Anon., \textit{A Record} p.2.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} ‘Trial, sentence, & execution of Harriet Parker’.
face through this image and the ascription to her of appropriate domestic femininity as she neared her end presents those following these cultural scripts with the painful fact that Parker was a real woman, not a phantasm and as such, monstrosity inheres as potential in all women. There was however an alternate and less terrifying model of the maternal killer in nineteenth century culture and we turn to her next.

2 The Humanitarian Narrative

Figure 4: Fanny Amlett Broadside

122 Judith Knelman’s short descriptive account of the Parker case agrees with a couple of my points: the judgment of Parker because of her sexual transgression, and the importance of the narrative of penitence: Knelman, Twisting in the Wind pp.134-6.
In searching through broadsides and newspaper reports related to child killing in the nineteenth century, I found no pictures of a young, unmarried mother killing her newborn. This is despite the fact that this was by far the most common kind of child homicide accusation at this time. Instead of an image of a murdered newborn, I will consider the broadside in Fig. 4. It was printed by noted printer J. Catnach, who set up business in the ‘low’ London printing locale, Seven Dials, in 1813. This is dated between 1813-1841 by Harvard Law Library, so it could have been one of his prized, early productions, and it also survives in the Bodleian John Johnson Collection.\footnote{I have not found any other references to the execution of Fanny Amlett in York, which supports the conclusion that this broadside is probably a ‘cock’ – apocryphal, but still worthy of examination as a piece of street literature. Whether representing a ‘real’ crime or not, this broadside beautifully encapsulates the sentimental cultural narrative underpinning judicial lenience towards women who murdered their newborn infants which was the dominant trend in nineteenth century newborn child murder cases.\footnote{Many scholars discuss the emergence of a humanitarian or ‘lenient’ approach to many of these cases from the eighteenth century onwards, including: Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus’; Grey, “Agonised Weeping”; Grey, ‘Discourses’; Daniel J. R. Grey, “‘The Agony of Despair’: Pain and the Cultural Script of Infanticide in England and Wales, 1860-1960,’ in Rob Boddice (ed.) Pain and emotion in modern history (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) pp.204-19; Higginbotham, “Sin of the Age”; Peter C. Hoffer et al., Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England 1558-1803 (New York University Press, 1984); Jackson, New-Born Child Murder; Mark Jackson, 'The trial of Harriet Vooght: continuity and change in the history of infanticide,' in Jackson (ed.) Infanticide pp.1-17; Kiday, A History of Infanticide; Dana Rabin, 'Bodies of evidence, states of mind: infanticide, emotion and sensibility in eighteenth-century England,' in Jackson (ed.) Infanticide pp.73-92; Tony Ward, 'Legislatting for human nature: legal responses to infanticide, 1860-1938,' in Jackson (ed.) Infanticide pp.249-69; Ward, 'The Sad Subject'.} I have not found any other references to the execution of Fanny Amlett in York, which supports the conclusion that this broadside is probably a ‘cock’ – apocryphal, but still worthy of examination as a piece of street literature. Whether representing a ‘real’ crime or not, this broadside beautifully encapsulates the sentimental cultural narrative underpinning judicial lenience towards women who murdered their newborn infants which was the dominant trend in nineteenth century newborn child murder cases.\footnote{I have used the Harvard copy: ‘Heart-rending execution of Fanny Amlett: a grazier’s daughter, near Scarborough, who was basely seduced from home by a naval officer, who brought her to disgrace, and then deserted her. She became pregnant, … in a fit of despair, and scarce knowing what she did, she drowned her new-born babe: for which she was brought to trial, and executed’ (J. Catnach, Printer, Monmouth-court, 7 Dials, [between 1813 and 1841]) Trials Broadside 401, Historical & Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library, \url{http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HLS.Libr:1088048} [Accessed 2 November 2015].} The eye and sentiment of the reader is immediately drawn in by a well-rendered woodcut depicting a dashing young British officer entreating his young beloved to leave with him in the boat next to the shore. His hand points to the boat, his eye entices the woman, while her eye is cast out to the horizon, drawing the viewer, too, into contemplation about what her future will hold as a result of succumbing to the officer’s seduction. The viewer is also reminded of the wrong committed to the father of the young woman (a ‘wealthy grazier’ the text informs us) as he is depicted at the top of the broadside, accompanied only by his farm dog, beside a tree stripped of leaves, symbolic of his blasted hopes, and the raven in the branches foretelling death. In the pictorial narrative, which proceeds from top to bottom of the broadside, the woman passes from the control of her father, into the hands of the officer, and thence, into the grip of the law, here represented by
the male figures of executioner and chaplain, and the grim, inert symbol of the scaffold. This scaffold image is unusual in showing the face of the condemned kneeling in prayer before execution, rather than the inert, shrouded body dangling after death. Fanny implores both God and the broadside consumer for mercy, a visual device that amplifies the main message in the text.

A story of male perfidy is told in the prose section of the broadside which follows the ‘seduction plot’ common in novels developing the infanticide theme and in popular melodrama. The villain here is a particular kind of rakish masculinity indulging in seduction without responsibility, and the carefully wrought ensign on the ship highlights that these crimes of abuse of women and subsequent infant murder are not confined to the ‘savage’ colonized other, which was a key discourse about infanticide in the early nineteenth century, but are carried out on British shores. Fanny, ‘deeply in love with the insidious betrayer … with a flattering tongue, & fine promises’, eloped with him to London where they lived the high life for a few months before he deserted her. Like ‘The Cruel Mother’ in the traditional ballad, and Wordsworth’s protagonist Martha Ray, Fanny’s infanticide tale was rural. She left London, hiding her shame by day and making her slow way through the countryside to Yorkshire, by night. Naturalization of Fanny continues in the verses:

Like some fair flowret in the vale,
That blooms the pride of May,
But blown at random by the gale,
It sweets doth fade away.

Remote she wander’d to and fro,
Expos’d to cold and wind.
Her hunger she did satisfy
With berries from the thorn,
And on the cold earth she would lie,


127 ‘Heart-rending execution of Fanny Amlett’.

And weep from night till morn.\textsuperscript{129}

Ah, the weeping. As in the Mitchel broadside discussed earlier, the prose and the ballad seek floods of tears from the consumer. ‘Her situation now may be felt by all who can sympathise with the sorrows of a ruined female, but it cannot be described’. Fanny ‘wept all day’ as she hid behind hedges. When she was eventually brought to trial and pleaded guilty, the Judge could not persuade her from this plea, and like the real Mr. Justice Willes, ‘he shed tears while passing sentence of death upon her’.\textsuperscript{130} Fanny then suffered the extreme penalty of the law, ‘amidst thousands of weeping spectators’. And if that weren’t enough, having read the prose narrative, the consumer approaches the verses to be entreated from the first, ‘For Fanny Amlett drop a tear’ and to ‘[m]ark, her sufferings how great, / Behold her tearful eye’. When she creeps into a ditch to bear her child, the reader is again addressed:

To hear how bitterly she wept,  
Would moisten every eye  
...  
And from her womb a lovely boy,  
With wail and weeping came.  
O think in pity on her lot,  
Ye tender mothers dear,  
Ye who at ease, all cares forgot,  
Blush not to shed a tear.

Just in case readers and listeners have not caught on, in the penultimate stanza we are called to ‘drop a tear for Fanny’s fate’ and again in the final stanza, ‘For Fanny Amlett drop a tear / ... A scaffold ends her days’.\textsuperscript{131} This broadside shares the language of tears with the Mitchel broadside. Yet in contrast to the ambivalence of the latter, here image, text and verse share a unified voice of pity for the shamed woman, and the real ‘crime’ is depicted as the seduction of the innocent and deluded young woman.

The sentiment strongly conveyed in images and text in this early-nineteenth century broadside was also voiced by leading figures who influenced the outcome of infanticide trials. Building on the views of medical practitioner Erasmus Darwin, who argued that young women killing their illegitimate babies should be ‘real Objects of our greatest Pity’, in 1783 Dr William Hunter delivered a highly influential paper about infanticide that continued to be cited as expert opinion into the nineteenth century:

\textsuperscript{129} ‘Heart-rending execution of Fanny Amlett’.  
\textsuperscript{130} ‘Heart-rending execution of Fanny Amlett’; Dixon, ‘The Tears of Mr Justice Willes’.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
In most of these cases the father of the child is the real criminal, often cruelly so; the mother is weak, credulous, and deluded. Having obtained gratification, he thinks no more of his promises: she finds herself abused, disappointed of his affection, attention, and support, and left to struggle as she can, with sickness, pains, poverty, infamy; in short, with complete ruin for life!\footnote{Dr William Hunter, ‘On the uncertainty of the signs of murder, in the case of bastard children,’ \textit{Medical Observations and Inquiries}, 6 (1784) 266-90 – published posthumously. The long-term significance of this essay is evident from its prominence in a key nineteenth-century medical jurisprudential work, from which I have taken the quote: William Cummin, \textit{The Proofs of Infanticide Considered. Including Dr. Hunter’s Tract on Child Murder, with Illustrative Notes} (Longman, Rees, Orme, Green, and Longman, 1836) p.5. For Erasmus Darwin’s view from 1767, see \textit{The Letters of Erasmus Darwin}, ed. Desmond King-Herle (Cambridge University Press, 1981) p.42.} 

This kind of sympathy for young women bearing children resulting from ‘seduction’ was strengthened by the furor surrounding the bastardy clauses of the 1834 New Poor Law which made it much more difficult for the mother of an illegitimate child to get support for it from the father.\footnote{Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ ch.2; Committee for Amending the Law in Points Wherein it is Injurious to Women (CALPIW), \textit{Infant Mortality: its cause and remedies} (CALPIW, 1866); Ursula R. Q. Henriques, ‘Bastardy and the New Poor Law,’ \textit{Past & Present}, 37 (1967) 103-29; Higginbotham, ”Sin of the Age”; McDonagh, \textit{Child Murder}, ch.4.} It is particularly significant that pity for the shamed young woman was then echoed in textual sources from the 1860s when the Victorian ‘infanticide panic’ was at its height. William Burke Ryan, who was the first Victorian medical man to make a strong critical statement about the extent of infanticide in Britain, can be cited as an example. Even Ryan, who wrote of a ‘slaying epidemic’ which ensured that ‘the feeble wail of murdered childhood in its agony assails our ears at every turn’, could plead that society should regard young unmarried women killing newborns with forgiveness and pity because they were the ‘unhappy victims of … seduction’.\footnote{Ryan, \textit{Infanticide} pp.45-6,28.}

A number of historians, including Joel Eigen, Peter King, and Deirdre Palk, have pointed out that in the eighteenth and first part of the nineteenth century, juries and sometimes judges often searched for ways to reduce the culpability of defendants in order to mitigate harsh penal statutes which punished those convicted with execution.\footnote{Eigen, \textit{Witnessing Insanity} ch.1; Peter J. King, ‘Decision-Makers and Decision-Making in the English Criminal Law, 1750-1800,’ \textit{Historical Journal}, 27 (1984) 25-58; Deirdre Palk, \textit{Gender, Crime and Judicial Discretion} 1780-1830 (Boydell Press, 2006) pp.125-35. For primary evidence see ‘Report of the Capital Punishment Commission’.} One group which benefitted from this practice was single, young women accused of killing their newborn babies and the foregoing discussion illustrates the key shame narrative supporting mitigation, which had its modern roots in eighteenth century sentiments discussed by

\[132\]
Thomas Laqueur and Dana Rabin. Mark Jackson has pointed out that the clauses in Lord Ellenborough’s Act of 1803, which repealed the Jacobean concealment of birth statute and brought all killings of bastard newborns back within the common law of homicide, were designed to stamp out lenient treatment of these women and to increase convictions for these crimes. He found that on the Northern Assize Circuit there were more executions of women for killing newborns in the early nineteenth century than there had been during the later decades of the eighteenth. It could well be the case that the Fanny Amlett broadside was produced in the early years of Catnach’s business in response to a perceived increase in executions of women for infant murder. My research on nineteenth century judicial records indicates that this increased punishment of mothers for killing their babies was relatively short-lived and that the shame narrative so eloquently communicated in the broadside under discussion dominated legal decisions in cases where mothers were accused of killing their newborns in the nineteenth century. This argument is supported by the work of other scholars in the field, though the thread of ambivalence caused by fears of monstrous motherhood remained. The medical jurisprudential dilemmas of proving live birth, and a gap in the law between abortion and murder, which effectively rendered the infant in the process of birth unprotected by any law, meant that gaining convictions for alleged murders of newborns by mothers who had been unassisted at the births, was extremely difficult. No woman in England was hanged for the murder of her own infant after Rebecca Smith in Wiltshire in 1849, and the child in that case was a month old. Here, the mother had admitted poisoning eight of her children, so this was an extreme case, part of the mid-century poisoning epidemic and thus an unlikely candidate for humanitarian sympathy. At the Old

---

139 Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus’.
141 Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ ch.3.
Bailey, there was not a single person, female or male, found guilty of murdering a newborn infant after 1828.\textsuperscript{143} Most suspicious newborn infant deaths that ended up in the Old Bailey were prosecuted as concealment, not murder, or returned as concealment verdicts on murder indictments. And as the century wore on, punishment for concealment decreased to a norm of short prison sentences, especially if the accused pleaded guilty to concealment: by the decade 1870-79, over 70 per cent of women who pleaded guilty to concealment before the Old Bailey received sentences of less than two weeks’ imprisonment, one of these even being non-custodial.\textsuperscript{144} I am certainly not claiming that all these women intentionally killed their babies – it is impossible for the historian to know whether concealment indictments and partial verdicts on homicide charges were legal fudges to get around the medico-legal difficulties in cases where newborn infants were intentionally killed, or charges and verdicts proportionate to the minor crime of simply concealing a birth where the baby was either born dead or died soon after from natural causes. Nevertheless this data still supports the premise that the criminal justice system treated suspicious deaths of newborn babies rather leniently. The Fanny Amlett broadside indicates synchronicity between popular cultural narratives and the broad trend of judicial lenience, adding popular and visual dimensions to the links Christine Krueger has drawn between literary representations and judicial outcomes.\textsuperscript{145}

### 3 Murdering Men: Monstrous, Pitiably and Victims of Women

The popular cultural messages about men murdering their children could be complex as can be seen from the two broadsides discussed in depth here. The first represents the drowning of his three children by recently widowed ‘John Marlew’ followed by his suicide, and a subsequent spousal murder by his brother. The second represents the murder of an eight-year-old child after extended cruelty by the father, John Smith, and his second wife, stepmother to the dead child. These represent only a small proportion of the different types of male child-killing cases encountered in criminal trials.\textsuperscript{146} Nevertheless they serve as an

\textsuperscript{143} Catherine Welch, 10 April 1828, was the last case – Old Bailey Proceedings Online, CATHERINE WELCH (t18280410-17). According to Capital Punishment UK she was executed at Newgate on 14 April 1828: [http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/1828.html](http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/1828.html) [Accessed 6 March 2012].

\textsuperscript{144} Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ appendix 1, table 7, p.284.

\textsuperscript{145} Krueger, ‘ Literary Defenses’.

interesting entrée into considering cultural representations of paternal child killing in the first half of the nineteenth century. While monstrosity was certainly an important theme, the broadsides also include narratives ameliorating the responsibility of the male killers. These concern bereavement, ‘poverty’ and inability to fulfil their role as provider, and the ‘evil witch’ narrative suggesting that the men’s acts were crucially influenced by women who transgressed the boundaries of appropriate femininity. It is noteworthy that this latter narrative of women as the real villains behind male acts of child killing exactly reverses the cultural narrative of male perfidy underlying female acts of infanticide, discussed above in relation to the Fanny Amlett broadside.

Figure 5: Marlew Broadside

There are other similarities between the Fanny Amlett and Marlew broadsides. In both broadsides, visual images, prose and verses have a more united voice than is the case for many broadsides; this may be because they are both probably 'cocks' without reference to particular events.\textsuperscript{147} I have located three different versions of the Marlew broadside: the one already cited, dated as 1820s-1830s in the Bodleian Harding collection, printed by William Kent of Newcastle; another, without the illustration but with the same text, in the British Library, printed by Horlock, which the BL suggests may have been made in Swanage in 1885;\textsuperscript{148} while another appears in Cambridge University Library printed by J. Catnach in London, and dated c.1830 by that library.\textsuperscript{149} I have yet to locate an actual case association for this broadside so the British Library’s catalogue entry suggesting it is a ‘possibly fictitious account of murder and suicide’ is probably correct.\textsuperscript{150} This all suggests that at least one and probably two versions of the Marlew broadside date from the first half of the nineteenth century, and that the meanings communicated by the broadside continued to have currency across many decades.\textsuperscript{151}

The powerful image occupies the top third of this broadside. The bold text immediately above the image ensures that the viewer knows the narrative moment depicted: the man is in the process of drowning his children immediately before committing suicide by the same means. The simple image of the suicidal man’s grief stricken, sunken features, immune to the imploring arms of his drowning child, initially elicits shock, yet the mournful face of the man, together with the description of him immediately above the illustration as ‘the miserable Man, in a fit of Despair’ produces a shift towards sympathy for the pitiable fate of this family.\textsuperscript{152} This message is strengthened by many textual elements in the broadside. The

\textsuperscript{147} A horrid and dreadful account of John Marlew, who with his three starving children, went to seek assistance from a rich brother, - relating, how his brother’s wife turned them out of doors, when the miserable man, in a fit of despair, went home, and drowned himself and three children in a well in his garden’ (William Kent, Printer, 22 Side, Newcastle, n.d. [1820s-1830s]) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Broadsides: Murder and Execution Folder Harding B 9/4 (236).

\textsuperscript{148} Exactly the same title ([Swanage]: Horlock Printer, [1885?]) in BL broadside folio: General Reference Collection 74/1888.c.3(141).\textsuperscript{149} Exactly the same title (London: J. Catnach, Printer, 2 & 3 Monmouth-Court, 7 Dials [ca 1830?]).\textsuperscript{150} COPAC: \texttt{http://copac.jisc.ac.uk/search?title=John\%20Marlew&m=1} [Accessed 30 October 2015].\textsuperscript{151} On Catnach’s retirement date see Charles Hindley, \textit{The Life and Times of James Catnach (Late of Seven Dials)}, Ballad Monger (Reeves and Turner, 1878) p.xi.\textsuperscript{152} ‘A horrid and dreadful account of John Marlew’. 
‘mournful verses’ leave no doubt, indicating that tears are the appropriate feeling response to the tale:

Come listen to this mournful tale,  
All those who have a heart to feel;  
Nor will they blush to shed a tear,  
This tale of misery to hear.\(^{153}\)

We are furthermore drawn into sympathy through the prose depicting the experience of the penurious man’s brother when asked for help: The brother, powerfully moved by the story of Marlew’s misery and the ‘perishing hunger’ of the motherless children ‘was affected to tears during the recital of his miseries’. The narrative guides us to an encounter between the poor man and his sister-in-law. His brother sent him to her with clear instructions that she provide the poor man with food for the family: ‘falling upon his knees’ he begs his sister-in-law ‘to have pity upon his children’. The prose reiterates that he was ‘[i]n despair, such as no language can describe’ while the verses remind us that he was an ordinary man fallen on very hard times: an ‘… honest man of low degree, / Reduc’d to want and beggary’. But his sister-in-law did not follow her husband’s instructions, instead turning her starving brother-away. The reader witnesses the tragedy through yet more tearful eyes. Upon discovering his wife’s behaviour, the rich brother dispatches a servant to his brother’s house, carrying both victuals and money. Yet this is too late: the servant discovers the bodies in the fateful well. It was ‘[w]ith tears’ that the servant ‘returned and told his master of the horrible tale’. Marlew’s brother, ‘distracted to madness … immediately blew out his wife’s brains with a pistol, then went and delivered himself up to justice’.\(^{154}\)

The broadside thus tells a tale of three-fold transgression and crime. The first was the moral heartlessness and insubordination of the rich brother’s wife, which the broadside claims underlay the whole ‘horrible catastrophe’. She refused to give Marlew food for his family, although her husband had directed her to do so. Description of the husband’s instruction as an ‘order’ is repeated several times on the broadside. When Marlew sought her help, he received a ‘haughty reception’. His sister-in-law, ‘an inhuman wretch’, with a pitiless, ‘flinty heart’, spoke to him ‘in a most insolent tone’. [A]lthough his entreaties might have softened the most hardened heart she ‘rudely pushed the miserable family out of doors’, sending them away with no food at all.\(^{155}\) The second crime was Marlew’s murdering his children by

\(^{153}\) A horrid and dreadful account of John Marlew’.  
\(^{154}\) Ibid.  
\(^{155}\) Ibid.
drowning them in a well, followed by his own suicide. And the third was the rich brother’s murder of his wife. It is important to consider carefully the sympathetic stance of the broadside towards the murderous men.

Despite the horror of this violence – the father tying his children together ‘with a thick cord … and deaf to their piercing cries’, throwing them into a well – we have seen how the broadside seeks the sympathy of the reader and listener by turning attention onto the pitiable suicidal father rather than dwelling upon the violence against the children.156 Cathryn Wilson, too, found in narratives of paternal murder/suicide in The Times during the later nineteenth century a tendency towards sympathy for fathers unable to support their children achieved in part by a similar narrative shift away from the murdered children to focus on the fathers’ stories.157 This historical cultural representation of a father killing his children and committing suicide because he could no longer perform his role as family provider has uncanny echoes in other times and places. While constructions of masculinities are both unstable and varied, many historians of both middle- and working-class masculinity have found a long-term continuity in the association of masculinity with providing for families. As John Tosh notes of the nineteenth century middle class, ‘To form a household, to exercise authority over dependants, and to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and protecting them – these things set the seal on a man’s gender identity’.158 Marlew’s domestic authority was fatally undermined by his unemployment, poverty and inability to feed his family.159

---

156 ‘A horrid and dreadful account of John Marlew’.
157 Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’ p.157.
The centrality of the expectation that men should exercise domestic authority in their homes meant that the normal behaviour of control and mastery could easily translate into domestic violence which was widespread in working-class homes and not uncommon in middle-class families in the nineteenth century.\(^{160}\) The story on the broadside is one of atrocious domestic violence directed by men against both children and a spouse, yet neither of these transgressions is harshly judged. Only the insubordinate wife is roundly condemned and the reader is not counselled to pity her despite her gruesome fate. Cathryn Wilson also found sympathy for male child killers when women’s bad behaviour was deemed the cause of the men’s murderous actions. Wilson describes this shift of blame in the case of James Walker who murdered one of his three children in 1886. On the day of the murder his wife had left Walker with the children to go out drinking and The Times reported that he “lived unhappily with his wife.”\(^{161}\) She was reported to have stayed out all night and only discovered her child was dead the next day. There are echoes of the circumstances of Parker killing her stepchildren discussed earlier (Blake, too, only discovered that his children had been murdered the morning after spending the night with a prostitute). Yet in the Walker case, all the sympathy was reserved for the child killer. The Times reported the crowd’s behaviour at the child’s funeral, clear social manifestation of the cultural script in the Marlew broadside: “At the funeral of the child, the mother, to whose misconduct Walker attributed his crime, was made the subject of a hostile demonstration on the part of the crowd, and was with difficulty protected by the police from violence.”\(^{162}\)

Martin Wiener has found evidence within trials of some jury sympathy for men’s murders of their spouses in the first part of the nineteenth century, which would correlate with the lack of criticism of Marlew’s brother killing his wife.\(^{163}\) While Wiener and other historians point to reduced tolerance of male violence, recent work by Jade Shepherd and Cathryn Wilson

\(^{159}\) Different aspects of domestic authority are usefully considered in Delap et al. (eds.) The Politics of Domestic Authority.


\(^{161}\) The Times, 3 May 1886, p.4, cited in Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’ p.160.

\(^{162}\) Ibid, p.162.

\(^{163}\) Wiener, Men of Blood.
complicates the picture by suggesting that the kind of sympathy for paternal child killing under certain circumstances represented in the Marlew broadside may have continued through to the end of the nineteenth century.\footnote{More research is needed to differentiate long-term trends in responses to male child killing and spouse killing. Shepherd, “One of the Best Fathers”; Shepherd, ‘Victorian Madmen’; Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’ The sympathy communicated by the Marlew broadside also correlates with some sympathy noted by Melissa Gregory in representing certain kinds of paternal child killing in The Times in the first part of the nineteenth century: Gregory, “Most Revolting Murder”.

Shepherd, “One of the Best Fathers”; Shepherd, ‘Victorian Madmen’.\footnote{Edward Harvey and Harriet Ray (1856), Old Bailey Proceedings Online case (t18560107-185.)} Wilson, ‘Mad, Sad, or Bad?’} Shepherd has concluded that sympathy for paternal child killing triggered by men’s failure to live up to the expectation to provide for their families lay behind a steady trickle of insanity verdicts and consequent admissions to Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum.\footnote{Shepherd, “One of the Best Fathers”; Shepherd, ‘Victorian Madmen’.} Furthermore Wilson has outlined for the same later nineteenth century period a range of circumstances surrounding paternal filicides that resulted in representations sympathetic to the male perpetrator, and indeed, to many verdicts of insanity that avoided the capital penalty for murder.\footnote{Edward Harvey and Harriet Ray (1856), Old Bailey Proceedings Online case (t18560107-185.)} Marlew’s brother is explicitly described on the broadside as ‘distracted to madness’. Furthermore, Marlew’s extremely downcast face in the woodcut, reiteration of his ‘despair’ in the prose, and explanation in the verses that ‘His poor wife’s death distress’d his mind’, together indicate loss of reason. Wilson defines the different circumstances resulting in sympathy for male child killers in the cases she studied as poverty, bereavement and betrayal and we have seen different versions of these narratives operating on a single broadside.

Yet sympathy was not always extended to fathers who did not provide adequately for their families. In many manslaughter and neglect cases fathers were punished for failure to fulfill their duty to provide. An exemplary case will suffice here. After the passing of the New Poor Law in 1834, if a man was unable to provide for his family, it was his responsibility to take them into the workhouse. Edward Harvey, tried before the Old Bailey in 1856, fell foul of this requirement.\footnote{Edward Harvey and Harriet Ray (1856), Old Bailey Proceedings Online case (t18560107-185.)} He, his four children and his common law wife had been in Bethnal Green workhouse in the middle if 1855. Clearly, they did not want to repeat this experience. When unemployment later in the year led again to destitution, the family failed to enter the Union after Harvey received the order to do so. The occasional basic rations received from the Union were not enough to prevent Harvey’s two middle children, aged five and seven, dying from starvation in December that year. There was little sympathy for his failed fatherhood and he was imprisoned for a year on conviction for manslaughter. His partner, Harriet Ray, was acquitted – neglect to provide was deemed primarily the father’s crime when there were
two parents.⁶¹ All of this strongly indicates the need for comprehensive research into media representations of these paternal crimes (all homicides and murder suicides such as that represented on the Marlew broadside) and their relationship to trial outcomes across a long time period.

The interwoven stories on the Marlew broadside also support Melissa Gregory’s argument that representation of the pain of infanticidal fathers served to legitimize domestic violence against women.⁶² The two different acts of male domestic violence depicted reflect the few dramatic cases in real life where fathers and husbands solved the problem of their failure through murder, even family annihilation.⁶³ These were, and are, crimes with an ancient lineage: crimes rooted in shame (already considered in the different context of murders of newborns by young women); crimes committed to avenge honour slighted.⁶⁴ The powerful

---

⁶¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of Old Bailey cases where both parents were indicted in circumstances where poverty was an issue and their child died, see Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus,’ ch.6. See also Conley, The Unwritten Law, ch.4; Grey, ‘Discourses,’ ch.5.

⁶² Gregory, “Most Revolting Murder”.


image of male despair on the broadside combined with prose and verse shot through with the language of suffering and pity provided a compelling stimulus to sympathy. And we will soon see that the narrative of quite atrocious male violence being blamed on women who have failed to behave within the strictures of female propriety was not confined to the Marlew broadside.
The broadside in Fig. 6 tells the story of John Smith, aged 39, and his second wife (and thus stepmother of his children), Elizabeth, aged 27, systematically starving and assaulting their
daughter.\textsuperscript{172} This crime occurred in Suffolk in 1812.\textsuperscript{173} There is a rich language of emotion in this document, particularly in the verses and represented in the image, and in its intended effects on the viewer. The broadside is comprised of an elaborate, graphic image occupying about a third of the broadside immediately underneath the banner headline. The production values in the headline are high and immediately impressive, drawing the reader in with the exclamation of ‘Tragedy!’ in the top line. As the eye follows the story down the page, it is immediately arrested by the horror of the image, representing gross parental abuse.\textsuperscript{174} The powerful illustration represents monstrosity, particularly in the face of the father, and anguished suffering in the face of the child. The prominent axe and spade in the bottom right hand corner indicate the intended secret burial of the corpse of the child, and their position next to the father implies that this was his intended responsibility. The narrative thus evokes the eloquence of the corpse representing the appalling transgression of domestic norms even before the child’s death.\textsuperscript{175} The image is equivocal regarding the responsibilities of the wife. While her face appears much more passive than her husband’s, and she holds the lamp in an apparently helping role, she also holds the birch in a position about to beat the child.

The text label immediately underneath the image strengthens the graphic message: the father and mother (in that order in the text) are ‘cruel’. Not only was Mary Ann hung up in a shed, but this was also ‘in the Depth of Winter’. She was ‘barbarously beat’ and in the end starved to death.\textsuperscript{176} So cruelty and barbarism are key messages in both image and this short passage of text. Barbarism here is used to condemn the Smiths as uncivilized ‘others’, behaving in utter contempt of the most basic social expectations of parents.


\textsuperscript{174} The idea of hanging a child up in this way is shocking to a modern reader, yet there is evidence from modern Greece that hanging children up by ropes can be used as a form of punishment: Muchembled, A History of Violence p.20. For corporal punishment of children in nineteenth-century England see the semi-autobiographical fiction of Samuel Butler, The Way of All Flesh (Jonathan Cape, 1903); Walvin, A Child’s World, pp.45-60. One pamphlet about this case used it to warn family heads and others inclined to abuse such as that committed by the Smiths that execution awaited them if their cruelty should lead to death: Anon., Brownrigg the Second; or the Cruel Stepmother. The Full Particulars of the Trial and Execution, of John and Elizabeth Smith, At Ipswich in the County of Suffolk … (Printed and sold by J. Pitts, Seven Dials [1812]). ‘Brownrigg the Second’ in the title refers to the notorious case in 1767 when Elizabeth Brownrigg abused her female apprentices to the point of killing one of them. She too hung her victims up. She was executed at Tyburn on 14 September 1767. This case was widely reported in the eighteenth-century press and it is very interesting to see that cultural memory of the case lasted nearly half a century.

\textsuperscript{175} D’Cruze, ‘The Eloquent Corpse’.

\textsuperscript{176} ‘The Suffolk tragedy!’}
The text below the image is comprised of three parts: first, a report of the trial; second, a short report on the demeanour of the prisoners in court and of their double execution; and finally, a ‘copy of verses’. Despite awkward meter, the verses perform elemental emotional work and thus develop the emotional language of the image. The first stanza calls up the visceral responses of readers and listeners with which we are now familiar: they seek to ‘draw a tear from every eye’ and expect the story told to produce horror, making the consumer’s ‘hearts’-blood run cold’. The key to the listeners’ understanding that these criminals have been properly punished is represented in the last stanza: they ‘felt their crime’ – the agony of a guilty conscience, and the shame brought about by public hanging. The condensed, narrative quality of the ballad is fundamental to its power – by comparison with many broadsides, these verses are short and swift: there are only five four-line stanzas. The message of ‘barbarity’ in prose and image is mirrored in the verses – indeed, these ‘monsters’ expressed ‘barbarity of the blackest dye’ through their atrocious treatment of their child. The verses marvel that such levels of hatred could be harboured by parents for their child, leading to cruelty ‘dreadful to relate’. When all this is considered together, the tears entreated by the verses are definitely on behalf of the suffering of the child whereas in the Mitchel, Amlett and Marlew broadsides varying amounts of the consumer’s sympathy is guided towards the perpetrators.

The verses express a different view of the relative culpability of the parents than that communicated graphically. In one stanza the father is a well respected ‘labouring man’, while his wife is described as ‘a cruel stepmother, hard-hearted sure was she’, this point reiterated later in describing her in court as ‘heardened to all that pass’d around’. As in so many crime and execution broadsides, despite the horror of the crime depicted, the verses conclude with a very brief expression of ‘hope that for their crimes, sincere they did repent’. We have already noted that repentance by the criminal was required for closure of the moral tale of crime and punishment, yet in these verses, this closure is accomplished in perfunctory style, with no call on the broadside audience to experience pity for the criminals. Their crime was just too horrendous, expressive of monstrous paternity and monstrous maternity.

With more words available than in the verses, the prose could embellish fundamental points emphasised in the verses, and also reveal more complex and contradictory narratives. The main section of prose reads as a news report of the trial, beginning with rather formal outline of the indictment. The word ‘indicted’ in the first sentence sets the serious tone, and as

---

177 ‘The Suffolk tragedy!’
178 Ibid.
description of the case unfolds, we are told that witnesses ‘depose’. Medical expertise is also prominent, with a surgeon who saw the murdered child before she died describing her ‘dreadful state, ... more emaciated than any child he ever saw; and ... her feet were mortified at the ankles’.179 Another medical man ‘deposed that he opened the body of the deceased; and that she died from want of food, and mortification’.180 The jostling of points of view in this broadside, including this use of legalistic and medical language, supports Miriam Jones’s characterization of ‘the hybridization of orality and professionalism that characterizes broadside accounts of child-murder’.181 The early nineteenth century was a crucial period for development of professional expertise in medical jurisprudence in Britain, and many key medical jurisprudential texts that became central to professional practice in the nineteenth century remained to be written, so this 1812 popular cultural representation of the delivery of medical evidence in court is certainly interesting, and I think begs further research to refine understanding of the development of such representations and their relationship with court practice.182

The message regarding the comparative culpability of the parents in the prose is complex. Both the story of greater paternal monstrosity represented by the image, and the story of the monstrous stepmother indicated in the ballad, can be found competing in the prose text, just as different narratives compete for ascendancy during any criminal trial. While the sister of the male prisoner claimed it was her brother’s new wife who had hung the child up in the shed, and she together with some other witnesses claimed the male prisoner had always been a kind father, the constable who arrested the father retold the story the father had told him – that while his wife ‘insisted the child should be put in the shed’, it was he who actually ‘put her there three different nights. He also said he had hung her up, but not by the neck, but by the middle’. Furthermore, a pamphlet about the case also represents the father carrying out the abuse in the shed.183 Yet the story that the man was corrupted by his cruel second wife is also suggested in other evidence: one witness is reported as saying that the father looked after his children well while married to his first wife; and the policeman in the text reports the father claiming that in response to his complaints about their poverty despite his hard work, his new wife said that ‘the children will soon be off our hands, and we shall do

179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
183 Anon., Brownrigg the Second.
better'. In the end, even though the poverty narrative peeped out between the lines, there was no escaping the overall message of monstrosity. Both parents were convicted after a five-minute jury consultation, after which the judge told the prisoners that they stood ‘convicted of a most barbarous murder, at which human nature revolts—that of your child, by a series of unparalleled cruelties and tortures. An offence more wicked than yours cannot be’. His first upbraiding was for the father for inflicting tortures and allowing the child to be persecuted by his wife. The female prisoner was ‘equally guilty’, particularly for withholding nourishment for the children. The judge’s wish for the prisoners’ repentance effectively communicates the tight knit between religion and criminal justice at the time: ‘you are about to fall victims to your country’s just laws. I entreat you not to expect mercy can be administered to you in this world; but prepare, by pious devotions, for the tribunal before which you will shortly have to appear’:

The broadside reports that they both confessed, including to intention to kill all their children, ensuring that the broadside gave the message of justice rightly dispensed. The conventional narrative of penitence was also completed, yet they remained ‘a sad example of the depravity of human nature!’ and were promptly hanged before ‘an immense concourse of spectators’ at Ipswich.

Underlying the depiction John Smith’s monstrosity in this broadside lies the ancient trope of the monstrous woman. The man’s defense represented in the broadside rests on the power of his wife to corrupt him. Elizabeth Smith ‘seemed indifferent to either the trial or the sentence, and never moved a muscle’; and in the verses, ‘the woman seem’d so heartened to all that pass’d around’. One of the characteristics of witches was alleged to be their inability to shed tears. Elizabeth’s imperviousness is compared with John who in court ‘seemed much affected’… and ‘wept bitterly’ when sentenced. Lack of demonstrated affect and dry eyes continued in modern times to influence responses to defendants in the dock.

This message that the woman was the worst monster was blatant in the title of one of the

---

184 ‘The Suffolk tragedy!’
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 See the first systematic book on witchcraft written by two Dominican friars - powerfully influential and published over two centuries: Heinrich Kramer et al., The Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches) (1487) in Alan C. Kors et al. (eds.) Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History 2nd edn (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) p.215; and several seventeenth-century Scottish witches confessed that they could not weep: Sir George Mackenzie, The laws and customes of Scotland, in matters criminal wherein is to be seen how the civil law, and the laws and customs of other nations do agree with, and supply ours (Printed by James Glen, 1678) p.106. I have not yet been able to trace this issue in nineteenth-century English witchcraft beliefs and accusations.
189 A relevant example is the Australian ‘dingo baby case’ where Lindy Chamberlain, notoriously dry-eyed, was wrongly convicted of murdering her baby. For a range of essays see Adrian Howe, Lindy Chamberlain Revisited: A 25th Anniversary Retrospective (LhR Press, 2005).
pamphlets about the case: Brownrigg the Second; or the Cruel Step‌mother ... . And this was despite the fact that within the pamphlet (as in one of the narrative threads in the broadside) the man is described as inflicting the tortures in the shed. The figure of the powerful, evil Lady Macbeth figure behind the apparent male ‘sovereign’ (whether King or male head of the family) is as old as myth, embedded in Western culture through the story of the ‘fall’ in Genesis, contemplated in ‘high’ literature, and evident in popular literature of the street such as the broadside and pamphlet about the Smith case. Men were certainly capable of being monsters, but how much of that was understood as caused by women’s malign influence, particularly where the mistreatment of children was concerned?

Conclusion

Messages on the broadsides studied are frequently complex, contributing to sometimes conflicted responses to and understandings of crimes of violence against children. At the most basic level the broadsides demonstrate horror and fascination with these homicides of children. Graphic violence in word and image symbolized starkly conflicts of power in intimate family relationships that usually remained hidden in closed domestic spaces. A clear gender war is represented in these broadsides, where women were sometimes blamed for male crimes, and men for women’s transgressions, with children sometimes the victims of primary hostility between the parents. Fundamental matters associated with the ties that bind families and societies together were at stake. All the perpetrators violated dramatically societal norms regulating family relationships. The broadsides were part of the fraught discourse that was generated by such dramatic transgressions. They sought understanding of why these murders happened, and how each killer should be dealt with. The level of culpability of the perpetrator was of most significance because the tear in the fabric of society occasioned by the crime could only be healed through the operation of properly ordered justice re-establishing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

By stimulating deep emotional engagement with the stories of child killing, the broadsides expressed diverse anxieties about maternal and paternal violence, oppressive power relationship between women and men in intimate relationships, and the unpredictability and potential lethality of raving madness. The emotions generated encouraged intense engagement with the process of making sense of these extreme acts, and amplified the moral reflection and learning encouraged by the texts. The broadsides often sought to strike some kind of balance between condemnation of quite horrific acts, and sympathy for the dreadfully failed mothers and fathers represented as committing these crimes. The visceral...
horror of violent murders is powerfully strengthened by graphic images of violence on most of the broadsides discussed. This research has presented quite startling images of violence against children, and considered their unique visual language as integral to the social and cultural meanings communicated in the broadsides selected for analysis. The depiction of the violence certainly increased the likelihood of powerful emotional responses in broadside consumers. It was impossible to elide the physical reality of the extreme violence necessary to kill when confronted with images of the moment of death. Occasionally, through particular facial representations, woodcuts also drew the consumer into the emotional state of the killer: Parker's scowl on one of the sheets about her case; John Smith's vicious cruelty; Marlew's utter despair. The illustration of Marlew's sorrow corresponds with generation of sympathy for his failed masculinity through the verses and prose account, providing a compelling stimulus to pity. Coherence between text and image is even more straightforward in the other 'cock' studied, the Fanny Amlett broadside, where the central image of the young woman's seduction illustrates the sexual exploitation that lay at the heart of pity for the woman orchestrated by the verses and prose. None of the graphic, violent images on the other broadsides combined the pathos and violence that worked together in the Marlew image. Rather, these images communicated horror and in the words of another broadside scholar, 'astonishing spectacle'.\(^{191}\) It is noteworthy that the broadsides that I have linked to actual cases carried more complex messages. Images of graphic violence could be moderated with some element of pity for the perpetrator communicated by verse and prose. In some images of the scaffold, the figure of the prison chaplain is included, and the meaning of his presence augmented by narratives of right penitence accomplished by the prisoner in his or her journey between trial and scaffold. In other broadsides, the figure of the chaplain is missing, with verses and prose bearing the full weight of communicating any narrative of penitence. Multi-textual within themselves, these broadsides were also closely inter-related with consideration of child killing in other cultural products as diverse as illustrations, fairy tales and novels in what is now recognised as the ‘canon’. While these relationships are indicated rather than fully analysed here, the article points to the need for deeper understanding of how representations of child killing in broadsides and other contexts were culturally linked.\(^{192}\)

This paper also highlights many ways in which the broadsides and actual cases of child killing in the criminal justice system were related. Tears play a crucial role in these

---

\(^{191}\) O'Brien, *Crime in Verse* p.69.

\(^{192}\) Key work on literature without reference to broadsides includes McDonagh, *Child Murder*; Krueger, ‘Literary Defenses'; and on discussion of broadsides which would benefit from broader cultural contextualisation see Jones, ‘Fractured Narratives'; O'Brien, *Crime in Verse* pp.65-77.
broadsides and links between these representations and the tearful courtrooms described by Thomas Dixon have been drawn. Perhaps surprisingly, these tears in a number of the examples communicate pity for the fatally flawed mothers and fathers who killed their children, rather than for the children themselves. Even in the Parker sheets, where absence of tears is presented as evidence of lack of pity for the condemned, in this notorious revenge-motivated slaughter, the broadsides do not encourage tears of pity for the children. In the Fanny Amlett broadside, rivers of tears flow for the innocent maid seduced and not for her murdered newborn, mirroring the seduction plot in other cultural representations of infanticide in the nineteenth century as well as the relative lenience of courts when faced with women who were accused of killing their newborn infants. While a little sympathy for Marlew’s murdered children is evident in a reference to them as ‘poor babes’, still, the tears summoned in the verses are sought as response to the ‘tale of misery’ rather than the fate of the children per se. In the Mitchel sheet, the tears are primarily summoned in sympathy for the shockingly failed motherhood and Mitchel’s apparent madness. The significance of the association of tears with orchestrating responses to the criminals rather than to the dead children lies in the function of the broadsides in the discourse about justice. The child victims were already dead; it was the fate of the prisoner that lay in the balance. Further work on emotional courtrooms is required to really tease out the relationships between the courts and these cultural representations of tears.

It has been argued that in some broadsides the sanity of mothers, and on occasion fathers, who killed their children, was questioned. While the archetype of the monstrous mother is clear in graphic imagery, in the Mitchel broadside a contrary narrative of possible madness disrupts any certainty about motive, and raises the new horror of unpredictable, violent madness. The broadside’s complexity conveys tensions between monstrosity, madness, harsh judgment and mercy and thus raises the question whether in some cases explanations of madness were perhaps defences against the horror of monstrosity. Even in the Fanny Amlett ‘cock’, containing a simple narrative of female vulnerability from male seduction, an implicit question is raised about her sanity: ‘With anguish and despair most wild, / She lung’d it in the wave’. In the Marlew broadside, his ‘despair’ was cast as close to madness, brought about by bereavement, poverty and his inability to provide for his family. Some relationship between these cultural representations of madness and the quite frequent use of the insanity defence and verdict in child killing court cases has been suggested. A certain congruence between the stories in the broadsides and some judicial

---

193 ‘Heart-rending execution of Fanny Amlett’.
outcomes indicates a shared discourse between popular and legal culture that needs further exploration.

Penitence also emerges as an important theme in broadsides. While certain prisoners could be pitied and at least partly exonerated by their classification as mad, in other cases, this explanation was not available. The Parker case is illustrative: her vengeful motivation excluded any explanation of madness, and the judgement contained in the broadsides is mirrored by the lack of petitions for mercy in her Home Office file. Yet despite the monstrously transgressive act represented in picture, prose and verse, the Parker broadsides and the prison visitor's pamphlet describing Parker's life between trial and execution tell a story of reincorporation of the criminal through both her religious penitence and her assertion of appropriate femininity. These documents illustrate an intimate connection between the broadside narratives of penitence and the actual lived experience of at least one prisoner. While such evidence is not easy to find, this case suggests the need for further investigation of the relationships between the work of prison chaplains and visitors, the subjectivities of prisoners, and cultural narratives about penitence.

This discussion indicates certain common threads in responses to both male and female perpetrators. The horror of the crimes ensured that there was an element of monstrosity in the representations of all the criminals, apart from the young woman ‘Fanny Amlett’ who killed her newborn in the ‘cock’ discussed. While the monstrous mother had a well-known, long and mythic heritage, these broadsides point to the need for more analysis of the ways in which monstrosity was gendered, rather than focusing only on mothers. Sympathy for both female and male perpetrators can also be discerned when difficult or tragic life experiences led to the crimes, or when the possibility of the insanity of the perpetrator was considered. Yet misogyny emerges in different ways in the broadsides, and is not matched by a similar level of vilification of men. The most undisputed, negative view of a man comes through in the Fanny Amlett broadside, where the naval officer who seduced Fanny emerges as dashing, deceptive and exploitative. The well-crafted image emphasises this deception by depicting him kneeling before Fanny, a conventional sign of a man making a marriage proposal. In the end there are more female than male villains in these sheets. The wife of Marlew’s brother is described as a most heartless and disobedient woman and ultimately blamed for the familicide committed by her brother-in-law, and for her husband’s murder of her. Not only did her insubordination cause the mass slaughter, but it also triggered the prior emotional despair of Marlew, powerfully rendered in the depiction of his face in the engraving, and the immediate trigger of his murder/suicide. The misery and mass slaughter occasioned by her insubordination is not matched by any of the other stories! Discussion of
the Parker broadsides noted the consistent blaming of Parker for the adulterous sexual relationship with Blake, the father of the children she murdered in revenge for his philandering. Illicit sexuality was seen as the ultimate cause of these murders, and while his dubious sexual behaviour was certainly not ignored, the verses in particular contained misogynistic blaming of Parker in what could only be fictional renderings of the story of their relationship and emigration from Birmingham to London. Even the murderous abuse of his daughter carried out by John Smith was not presented in the broadside as indisputably his own fault – and thus the text ameliorates the undoubted monstrousness of his face in the woodcut. Here, an evil stepmother narrative emerges, blaming his new wife for distracting Smith from the path of good fatherhood into practices designed to kill his children.

While a handful of scholars recognise the significance of this ephemeral genre, this detailed study indicates the importance for criminal justice history of continuing research and analysis of broadsides. Although accurate figures for print runs and distribution of most individual broadsides are not available, the huge scope of the broadside business in the first half of the nineteenth century is commonly acknowledged, and there are many valuable collections to be found online and in libraries. Broadsides, and particularly illustrated broadsides as indicated in this article, are a rich source for exploring popular cultural mentalities with respect to crimes against children and even better, when the legal case any individual broadside relates to can be pinned down, they can then become part of a rich web of meaning woven around an individual case, as indicated by the record linkage accomplished in this article. Study of more broadsides about crimes against children in the nineteenth century could deepen the insights in this article about gendered responses to domestic tensions that were part of the cultural and social worlds of the plebeian and working-class consumers of broadsides.

Finally, this work provides intriguing insights into some of the big questions that remain unanswered or under explored in the history of child killing in Britain in the long nineteenth century. The Marlew broadside when read together with the research of Jade Shepherd, Cathryn Wilson and Melissa Gregory suggests that there may be a long story of sympathy for paternal child killing in certain circumstances that runs parallel with the story of judicial sympathy for women committing newborn child killing (despite the infanticide panic at mid-century). The long story of the use of insanity defences for both men and women in child killing cases is hinted at in the broadsides. While much is already known from current scholarship, for some reason most scholars choose to study either women or men. My own gendered study (1994), and that by Daniel Grey (2008), need to be extended and re-
interrogated in light of recent research.¹⁹⁴ We still need a detailed, long durée, fully gendered picture of criminal justice and cultural responses to child killing in all its guises. It seems as though we could well be looking at a discourse that splits men up into monstrous and ‘good’ fathers as well as splitting women up into monstrous and ‘good’ mothers, with narratives of madness being used to explain the inexplicable killings of their children by mothers and fathers deemed basically ‘good’ according to the norms of acceptable parenting. But this hypothesis is undoubtedly over-simplified and does not at the moment account for change over time. Any comprehensive fully gendered analysis across the 150 years or so from the late eighteenth century to the passing of the Infanticide Act 1922 would undoubtedly make new discoveries about the similarities and differences in the discourses about child killing by women and men, and their treatment before the courts for these crimes.

¹⁹⁴ Arnot, ‘Gender in Focus’; Grey, ‘Discourses'.