Child Murder and British Culture, 1720-1900 (review)

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Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xii + 278 pages, illustrated, hardback, £45 (ISBN 0 521 78193).

Infanticide is a crime which provokes fascination and repugnance in equal measure. Since the Biblical slaughter of the innocents, the killing of the defenceless child has represented one of the most heinous and morally indefensible of crimes. In one sense, infanticide is an unspeakable, unknowable offence which lies beyond the pale of civilization (and indeed, may define that boundary). How can any sane person wilfully kill a child? Yet, as this interesting and insightful study shows, child murder was a relatively common phenomenon in English society until the late nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, the roots of the problem lay in socio-economic inequalities: children were routinely killed by desperate mothers unable to cope, or died in droves in 'baby farms' (the grotesque precursor of the contemporary child-care facilities). Despite liberal reforms of the legal definition of child murder in the period covered by this book, the criminological, moral and sentimental burden of the crime fell most heavily on the mother. In this respect, any study of child murder casts light on that over-determined figure, the fallen woman. But the value of McDonagh's book is that it ranges much more widely than this – as she puts it, 'discussions of child murder frequently seeped into debates on other issues, often providing an example or test case through which society examined its own values and standards of civilised behaviour' (6). McDonagh's 'test cases' comprise a series of moments when the issue of child murder achieved a particularly powerful literary and cultural expression. Hence the cultural construction of infanticide performed creative and ideologically resourceful work well in advance of the socio-historical reality upon which it was based – indeed, as I will indicate below, McDonagh's most impressive interpretive discoveries demonstrate a formidable ingenuity in psychoanalytically tracing her theme through the repressed underworlds of some of her chosen texts, even though some of her conclusions are, as she admits, speculative.

Unsurprisingly, her narrative begins with that foundational infanticidal text, Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Chapter 1 locates Swift's famous satirical attack on British colonial policy in Ireland within the context of anti-commercial critiques of society. McDonagh's contribution to our understanding of Swift's satirical method is to suggest that behind the colonialist trope of cannibalism – a topic explored by Claude Rawson in *God, Gulliver, and Genocide* (Oxford University Press, 2001) – lies the shadow of a redemptive form of child murder, the sacrificial, 'socially

useful death' (23) which has its classical origins in the brutal Spartan policy of 'exposure', or the abandoning of children in order to cull the weakest. This is a tantalising recuperation of the utilitarian voice of the text, though McDonagh notes that this point 'is never stated directly' (22), and it is a moot point whether, on this evidence, it can be argued that the text 'albeit in a more muted way, evokes this civic humanist motif of the virtuous acceptance of infant death' (ibid.). Still, this is a good example of the book's Machereyan determination to show that the texts under discussion are performative in the way that they process the ideological contradictions and complexities of their zeitgeist. The point of a controversy is that it shows the lack of consensus: at the same time as Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* and Hogarth's *Gin Lane* exhibited a less ambivalent condemnation of the callousness of capitalist 'appetite' and waste, the emergent novel sentimentally recuperated the figure of the foundling, the 'realist' incarnation of the mythical changeling (and put another way, the figure of the orphan is a staple of the novel well into the nineteenth century).

Chapter 2 brings together texts from anti-slavery and exploration in order to show the influence of sensibility on the construction of child murder. The key development here is the inclusion of the act of looking in the representation of infanticide. Adam Smith argued in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that the 'sympathetic' response of the onlooker to the 'spectacle of suffering' was a key test of one's humanity, though Burke complicated this moral aesthetic by showing that it was also possible to feel sublime delight at the sight of terror and tragedy. Taking her cue from a vignette in Rousseau, McDonagh explores the range of emotional responses which the 'triangular' relationship between victim, violator and (often enforced) spectator made possible for the anxious and inescapably implicated reader. To some extent, the narrowing of this complexity to three types of child murder (by the father, by the humane mother and the depraved mother) imposes a limitation on those productive 'slippages' (37) within the violent gaze, though this approach is a welcome corrective to Marcus Wood's rather reductive focus on the voyeuristic appeal of such images in his book *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (Oxford University Press, 2002). In fact, as this reviewer's own work on 'spectacular violence' in this period has uncovered, McDonagh's examples are merely the tip of the iceberg. The violent slaying of women and children is a staple of atrocity scenes in anti-slavery propaganda and accounts of slave rebellions, war, revolution, colonial violence and the French Terror. Loyalist reports of the Irish rebellion of 1798, for example, depicted Irish rebels skewering babies on pikes. These images were later

re-presented to the Victorians in George Cruikshank's highly stylised illustrations for W.H. Maxwell's *History of the Irish Rebellion* (1845). But this raises a wider question which falls outside of the remit of the book – whether deaths inflicted on 'innocents' during military conflicts constitute 'murder'. Although the word genocide occurs frequently in this context, the idea of infanticide has been effaced.

Chapter 3 looks at canonical Romantic texts by Blake and Wordsworth in order to elicit a new bifurcation of the debate which will prove profoundly influential in the nineteenth century. The key text here is Malthus's *Essay on Population* (first published in 1798, the same year as *Lyrical Ballads*), in which 'Dame Nature' refuses sustenance to the needy poor who are surplus to requirements. At the opposite pole of the debate is the depraved, desperate mother, a figure McDonagh associates with the unruly, self-destructive mob of the anti-jacobin imagination. The figure of Dame Nature becomes the model for later, social-Darwinist and eugenicist discourses which themselves rework the older, sacrificial, redemptive views of infant mortality. But the idea can be appropriated for a critique of society's institutional negligence of children ('fatal carers' (72), in McDonagh's words) and (by implication) the working class. Hence the figure of the Romantic child-killer Martha Ray in Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' may seem like a counter-revolutionary moralisation of female sexual transgression (and yet another attempt by Wordsworth to work through his guilt over his own illicit affair with Annette Vallon), but the tone of tragic sympathy anticipates a full-blown battle between Victorian radical humanitarianism and utilitarian reformism, the theme of the second half of the book.

Chapter 4 will be of particular interest for students of Chartism, radicalism and nineteenth-century popular print culture, as it looks at the case of the infamous 'Marcus' pamphlet *The Book of Murder*. A conspicuous reworking of Swift and Malthus (and now available in Greg Claeys' excellent Pickering reprint series of Chartist tracts), this text proposed that the problem of working-class poverty could be solved by limiting reproduction to two children per family – surplus children were to be gassed (though not eaten). An illustrated version of the tract appeared in the physical force Chartist newspaper the *Northern Liberator*, but the authorship, tone and political allegiance of Marcus remained evasive and mysterious, a hidden referent behind the burgeoning print controversy – a 'textual explosion that eventually encroaches on 'real life" (105). The reason for this efflorescence of pamphleteering, itself a tribute to the recovery of the radical press from the years of the 'unstamped wars', was that the controversy was intensely over-determined, focussing concerns about child labour, the new Poor Law

of 1834 which made mothers responsible for 'bastards' (and inevitably led them to the workhouse, as in *Oliver Twist*, or towards the Martha Ray solution of infanticide, as befalls Meg Veck in *The Chimes*), Malthusian birth-control (an issue which divided radicals and the working class), scientific advance (the spectre of *Frankenstein*), the over-productive Irish who threatened wage dilution and lived in the worst ghettoes (evident in Carlyle's pamphlet on Chartism), and the suspicion that infanticide was a scam to claim burial-society insurance – the latter being a dreadful dereliction of Victorian moral reconstruction and Smilesian self-help. Ultimately, the murdered child is spectre haunting Victorian progressivism and positivism, hence Dickens's predilection for hobgoblins in *The Chimes* (and the discussion of this motif could perhaps have been pushed forward to Kingsley's *The Water Babies*).

Chapter 5 focuses on George Eliot's infanticidal novel *Adam Bede* (1859) and demonstrates the ingenuity of McDonagh's psychoanalytic methodology in the way that it traces repressed cultural narratives in the text. In a manner reminiscent of Marjory Levinson's New Historicist reading of the submerged content of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', McDonagh argues that child-sacrifice is a primal scene behind Eliot's novel. Again, the reason for this is the way that adjacent controversies 'seep' into this symbolic figure. Framing her case in Renan's theories of nationalism, the argument is made that Eliot's attempt to write a liberal-humanist nation-building novel is undermined by a chain of historical allusions which the text has 'forgotten' (for Renan, shared memories and amnesias are crucial to national consciousness). These repressed narratives can be traced back to the Irish rebellion and Union, and therefore reflect ongoing concerns about the lack of assimilation of Ireland into Britain, but the allusions also seep laterally into the Indian rebellion of 1857-8. The relevance of India was twofold: as the oriental Other, it was a nation which still practiced infanticide, but it also reflected the Other within Britain, as during this period there was widespread reportage about high rates of death in 'baby farms'. Hence 'the murdered infant had returned to Britain across the intricate networks of colonial desire' (143). Even if this conclusion is rather over-stated, this chapter is an excellent demonstration of the way in which a nuanced and historically-informed criticism can open up Victorian 'realism' to landscapes of fantasy and cultural anxiety.

Chapter 6 takes the story forward to Darwin and the eugenics controversy. Darwin changed his position concerning the evolutionary benefits between *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). In the earlier text he uses the example of the Queen Bee to rework Dame Nature's virtuous sacrifice of excess numbers, but in the

latter text he associated the practice with degeneration. The New Woman was also divided and muddled on the issue of eugenics and birth control. Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh deliberately courted controversy by proselytising for the working class to use contraception to alleviate poverty (rather than to sexually liberate women), but they based their argument of the classic eugenicist fantasy of degeneration – implicitly referring to the Irish, they declared that 'children born of such parents are literally a lower race' (cited 176). As some New Women tried to reconfigure Medea as an archtype of righteous anger and female emancipation, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896) produced a desolate version of child murder, a symbolism of despair 'relieved of all its meanings' (182). Yet, just beyond the chronological range of this book, it is worth noting that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, another feminist eugenicist, found a unique solution to these problems in her Utopia *Herland* (1915). In this exclusive female society, reproduction occurs via parthenogenesis.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the Irish 'threat' to English society, and completes the circle which began with Swift's *Modest Proposal*. George Egerton's infanticidal story 'Wedlock' is interpreted as an allegory about the growing pressure for Home Rule and the traditional call for Ireland to sacrifice her sons. The tragic figure of Medea is the New Woman's answer to Swift's Yahoos: flawed yet justified sacrifice, versus social and racial degeneration. Both critiques are devastating and disturbing.

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Jonathan H. Grossman, *The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), xii + 202 pages, illustrated, hardback, £27.50 (ISBN 0 8018 6755 X).

Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), x + 249 pages, illustrated, hardback, £47.50 (ISBN 1 4039 1139 8).

In spite of many differences, these two studies of nineteenth-century crime and detection narratives also share some features in terms of methodology and subject matter. Both Grossman and Frank's approach can be characterized as broadly new historicist and there is overlap in some of the authors and texts they analyze (Dickens and detective fiction by Poe and Doyle). The two studies each contextualize these narratives, Grossman with regard to the legal system, Frank in relation to contemporaneous scientific debates. However, whilst questions of