

BOOK REVIEW
Judith Rowbotham¹

Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth Century England: Literary and Cultural* (Routledge 2014) ISBN 97814 72421036 194pp, £95 hb

The title of this work was enough to engage my interest, especially since the blurb also indicated that the text was based on the kind of interdisciplinary scholarship I engage with and enjoy reading. It is impossible to disagree with the point that by exploring the ways in which audiences were presented with perspectives on crimes like murder, it becomes possible to understand the boundaries of acceptable social stereotypes and appropriate behaviour associated with masculinity and femininity. Such cultural phenomena as social attitudes towards criminality and the degrees of tolerance with which types of offensive behaviour were viewed are, and always have been, inherently flexible thanks to a range of developments and consequent cultural nuances. Understanding how attitudes towards murderers and their victims have changed (or not changed) over time and how that is reflected in the criminal justice process and levels of public support for that provides tangible markers helping towards to a better understanding of the factors behind change and continuity.

For Walsh, a key transition happens around 1870: marking a shift in attitudes culminating in the complexities of the *fin de siècle*. Personally, while I would endorse that concept of transition, I would back-date its origins to the late 1850s, and the beginnings of new attitudes manifesting themselves in legislation such as the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and the need to get used to and accept the ending of transportation and the new era of penal servitude at home, rather than overseas. It meant that at least some of the perpetrators of serious crimes like murder could now be expected, after a period, to return to the society they had so offended through their criminality. This induced a great deal of soul-searching and undoubtedly helped the phenomena that Walsh rightly identifies, in the form of a greater willingness to develop better insights into the psychology (as well as the pathology) of criminality.

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But as she also shows in her last two chapters, such insights were not universal, and they were certainly gendered. It is a particularly welcome feature of this text that it does not simply focus on women – either as victims or as perpetrators, or on men – ditto. The decision to survey the broad gender landscape brings a real balance to the project of what Walsh dubs ‘domestic’ murder. The inclusion of that famous murderous couple, the Mannings, underlines this. High contemporary expectations of masculine self-control are shown as being shattered with devastating consequences in works of fiction highlighted by Walsh. Her survey of killers includes Uncle Jasper from Dickens’ late, unfinished work, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, along with Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. She correctly, if implicitly, indicates that these 1860s literary figures cannot simply be dismissed as villains in the way that Dickens’ earlier killers, Jonas Chuzzlewit and Bill Sikes can. This is not simply because by then, Dickens himself was a more nuanced and sophisticated writer: there was, by that time, a more complex comprehension of masculinity and the pressures that expectations of high levels of manly self-discipline and associated stoicism in the face of emotions placed on individual men. This chapter is a real addition to the debate, and I simply wish I could express myself as positively over the rest of the chapters.

The next strongest chapter is undoubtedly that focusing on the *fin de siècle* female murderer, but that also highlights for me the very real reservations I have about the book as a whole. Walsh’s core argument is that domestic murder is best contextualised by drawing on an exploration of how it was represented in the press, and how it was depicted in the various forms of melodrama that were so beloved by the Victorians. I have no problems with this, as an overall perspective, and indeed would largely endorse it. One core issue though, is what constitutes a ‘domestic’ murder and whether that can be sustainably understood as a discrete and identifiable category. I am puzzled by her definition of what constitutes ‘domestic’. For instance, the starting point for the book is the murder of Maria Marten in the Red Barn, but it is difficult to see how that is a domestic murder in the same way as others focused on here, both in terms of the actual location and the depiction of the episode in the press and later melodrama. Maria was sneaking out to meet her lover, in their usual trysting place, leaving her own domestic space behind her. Equally, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Bradley Headstone’s murderous attack on Eugene Wrayburn has no clear link to any domestic space. But other murderers, real and fictional, do occupy a domestic space. The Mannings murdered their victim, Patrick O’Connor, in their own kitchen; while the domestic space was also the location for the deaths ascribed to the hands of

Florence Maybrick, Adelaide Bartlett and Mary Ann Cotton. Surely 'intimate' or some similar taxonomic device might have been better, given the omission from Walsh's consideration of the traditional type of 'domestic' killings, including infanticide and killings of employers by employees. None of the murders touched on here are 'stranger' murders, what they have in common is that both perpetrators and victims (real and fictional) are all known to each other. Is it realistic to call 'domestic' friendship and kinship circles? For me, the justification by an invocation of the ideology of the Victorian domestic space extending into the public seems a little strained and one that is not easily sustained within the historical or legal perspective.

There are also some very real problems with how, here, how newspapers and melodrama products are drawn upon and used. What Walsh has apparently not comprehended is the historical or chronological context in which these products appeared, and how this changed over time in ways that affects how these killings were presented and consumed. Walsh plainly states her decision not to engage with the 'law and literature' school of writing, and that is a great shame as this significantly weakens the arguments she develops for the book, particularly in relation to female murderers. The problem with doing an advertisedly interdisciplinary project is that you do need to respect the other disciplines you draw on, and neither history nor law (criminal law) are well served here. This is a problem because, apart from anything else, the Victorians DID understand the legalities involved in the criminal justice process, and how that was changing and developing over the years that are covered here. This was an era of very conscious reform and that consciousness is simply not visible here. The comparison drawn between Eleanor Piercey and Harriet Parker, in terms of public sympathy within the press, is for me not particularly convincing, for instance. I do not think there is such a clear line as is suggested here between a greater and more complex sympathy for murderesses in 1890 than there was in 1848 – strangely, the public debate over the execution of Elizabeth Brown in 1856, often held to be the inspiration for Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield, is not discussed here. In terms of ability to arouse public sympathy, a whole range of contextualising factors need to be invoked. While both women were provoked, in 1890, Piercey murdered an adult woman, her 'love rival', and almost incidentally that woman's child: in 1848, Parker killed her lover's two young children, diminishing the potential for sympathy.

Though briefly cited with my colleague Kim Stevenson, in terms of our first collection, *Behaving Badly*, I regret that she did not look at later collections we edited, and in particular the work of Shani D'Cruze. Her work, especially the chapter in Rowbotham

and Stevenson (eds) *Criminal Conversations* (2005) on the 1851 murder of Harriet Novelli could have informed her about how to do interdisciplinary work in a more balanced and effective way. Sadly, the Novelli murder is not examined here, but it garnered national as well as local attention at the time, including from the author Mrs Gaskell. I am also regretful that more attention was not paid to the sensation authors, particularly Mrs Henry Wood. I think Walsh's insights into the murderers of both sexes that she depicts, in titles like *St Martin's Eve*, *Oswald Cray* and *Lord Oakburn's Daughters*, would have been very interesting to encounter.

Equally, Walsh is on less than sure ground when tackling Victorian newspapers. The shape, thrust and focus of Victorian newspaper production changed dramatically from its pre-Victorian days and the coverage of Corder's murder of Maria Marten. This is not merely in terms of the technologies of production, but also of content. What also needs to be noted is not just ownership and editorship of newspapers (which set the tone and perspective for a particular title) but also the authors of the content. In the years covered by this book, the legal accuracy of reporting of court cases including murder trials improved significantly because of the use of legal professionals.² This, however, is not noticed, though it had a significant impact on the coverage, explaining one tangible reason for the difference in the details of the coverage of, for example, the Florence Maybrick trial with that of Corder.

This is, then, somewhat of a curate's egg of a book: what is good is undoubtedly good and makes a contribution to scholarship in this area, but there are other parts which fail to do so, and this undermines the overall quality of the book. Partly this is because, though attempting to be interdisciplinary, she has not achieved this; for one thing her readings in the secondary literature across the fields of literature, history and law/criminal justice is somewhat patchy. Often, in reading the early chapters in particular, the reaction is surprise that other, more significant or more recent (the two are not necessarily co-dependent) texts have not been drawn on, which would have enabled her to derive further and more substantial insights. Amongst those which could have been drawn on with benefit here are Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth Century London* (2012), and Shani D'Cruze, Sandra Walklate and Samantha Pegg *Murder* (2012). Then again, another factor in the failure of interdisciplinarity here is that while her command of the literary output is

² Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility 1820-2010* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) which also deals with the Corder case.

clearly sound, this is not something which is so apparent in terms of the other sources used, those dealing with actual events and crimes. One of the side effects of the digitisation of so much is that it makes it all too easy to focus simply on what is digitised and not look more widely.... Sadly, the *Daily Telegraph* is not digitised, for instance, and so it is not drawn on here, to give one example. A greater understanding and command of sources such as newspapers and the nuances of change over time would have helped overcome this. This could have been such a thoroughly good book that one is the more inclined to criticise it severely! I do regret that I cannot be more enthusiastic about it, but I do heartily recommend the chapter on male murderers.