



Gender, Familial Ideologies, and Aspects of Genre in the Early-Republic Murder Trial Report

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Up until 1750, the main “narrative expressing and shaping the popular response to the crime of murder” (Halttunen 1993: 67) in American culture had been the execution sermon, a theological narrative rooted in the Augustinian doctrine – and advocated by many Protestant confessions, including Calvinism – of humanity’s postlapsarian condition of total depravity (Halttunen 1993: 69). From this perspective, evil, and, by extension, crime, were to be construed less as a form of moral alienation and/or deviance (Halttunen 1998: 70; 71) than as the mere outcome of the fulfillment of the human potential for evil. One of the main examples of the jeremiad form (Bosco 1978: 163), the execution sermon was preached within the frame of the public ritual of execution (Halttunen 1993: 68).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment teleological belief in the progress of humanity began to undermine the notion of innate depravity in both the old and the new world, giving rise to a conception of humankind as endowed with a moral sense (Halttunen 1993: 80; Davis 1957: 28-29) and thus intrinsically good. This notion, which postulated the human ability to choose good over evil, gradually became the key understanding of human nature in America. This



paradigm shift was instrumental in terminating the supremacy of the execution sermon: as the American clergy started to lose its cultural influence (Baldwin 2013: 105-122), especially in New England, where the Puritans lost the monopoly over the national debate on murder (Cohen 2003: 33; Halttunen 1998: 95), a host of secular crime narratives began to appear (Cohen 2003: 33-34).

The dominant crime genre that emerged after 1800 was the murder trial report (Cohen 2003: 31; Halttunen 1998: 94), an “alternately moralistic, legalistic, and sensationalistic literature of crime and punishment” (Cohen 2003: 32-33), no longer focused on the rhetoric of universal sin and salvation but on the more mundane and specific circumstances leading up to the crime and to its treatment in the court of justice (Cohen 2003: 32; Halttunen 1993, 78). The authors of such documents were printers, ministers, reporters, attorneys, hack writers, sentimental poets and even the criminals themselves (Fabian 2000: 52), who often contributed to the flourishing market of print with pamphlets based on their real life and criminal stories. These pamphlets contained trial transcripts, murderers’ autobiographies and printed confessions, last speeches, and excerpts from private correspondence (Fabian 2000: 51-52), often accompanied by interviews with experts, and lessons by moral advisors.

The popularity of such texts was helped by the aforementioned secularization of crime narratives, which changed the public attitude towards the testimonies of convicted felons (Fabian 2000: 51). While up until the start of the nineteenth century they were unanimously deemed untrustworthy in every respect (Fabian 2000: 49), in the first two decades of the 1800s those convicts who decided to make their tales public came to be viewed as reliable: “with jury verdicts registered”, as Fabian explains (Fabian 2000), “facts in criminal cases were rarely in dispute and readers could turn to accounts of crime with confidence that, at least on some level, what they read was true”. By the 1810s, it was widely believed that people on the verge of death could not lie, so the emphasis on the ultimacy of the convict’s confession equated with a warrant for its veracity (Fabian 2000: 66).

Interestingly, murder accounts shared many similarities with the novelistic genre that reached its height in the same period (Halttunen 1993: 78-79); in an increasingly secular world, where the belief in a “sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world” (Brooks 1985: 6) had already dissolved, the need arose to shape the magmatic flux of events – especially the complexities of a murder case – into a coherent narrative structure, i.e., the plot (Halttunen 1993: 79). Furthermore, the growing interest in character, which especially marked eighteenth-century literature (Lewis 1987: 692; Wood 1982: 414), was reflected in an effort at “characterization and social reconstruction”, a trait which Halttunen deems typical of the novel’s “formal realism” (1993: 79), and that also characterized many of the coeval crime narratives.



The present article focuses on a case of matricide which happened in New Jersey in 1812.¹ In the spring of that year, a trial opened against Mary and Cornelius Cole, a married couple charged with the murder of Mary's mother, Agnes Thuers. The elderly woman, who lived with her daughter and her son-in-law on their farm in Sussex County, had been last seen in public in the first two weeks of December 1811 before disappearing without a trace. The Coles had explained her absence by stating that she had been visiting her mother in New York City. Early in March 1812, Mary and Cornelius moved east, after renting their house to Henry Crandlemier. With the first warmth of May came the thaw, which brought about a very unfortunate discovery. One day, halfway through a funeral held at the farm, Crandlemier and his guests were disturbed by an inexplicable stench pervading the house. Anxious to find the source of the odor, Crandlemier undertook to dig up part of the floor and found a decaying female corpse buried in a two-foot hole in the ground dug under the kitchen. The man, persuaded that the mortal remains belonged to Agnes Thuers, reported the couple to the authorities, which proceeded to detain them. Having ascertained that the body was that of Agnes, the authorities tried the Coles for murder. While Cornelius denied any involvement in the actual killing, confessing only to assisting his wife in concealing the crime and disposing of the mortal remains, Mary admitted the matricide but claimed that she had killed Thuers in self-defense. She was convicted and hanged for this crime, whereas her husband was sentenced to two years in prison for complicity.

That the case was sensational was proved by the fact that it was swiftly made into two criminal narratives: the first one was the trial report entitled *A Genuine Sketch of the Trial of Mary Cole for the Wilful Murder of her Mother, Agnes Thuers*, an unprecedented commercial success, so much so as to warrant a reprint in the following year. The second narrative, *The Confession of Mary Cole*, appeared in 1813, produced by a publisher based in New York who, apparently, had no direct knowledge of the court case.

A sixteen-page pamphlet, *A Genuine Sketch* belongs to a class of legal narratives that started to be published after 1800 and reached popularity after 1830, composed of selected parts of the judicial proceedings of notorious cases (Halttunen 1998: 94). The result of its close proximity to the court case, the text comprises the summaries of eleven of the testimonies delivered at the Cole trial, and the summing up for both the prosecution and the defense. It also includes two sections narrated in the first person, Mary Cole's "Farewell Letter to her Husband", and "Her Dying Speech", a firsthand account of "The Execution" and, finally, a closing section entitled "Some Serious Remarks" written by the publisher himself, J. W. Kirn.

The second narrative, *The Confession of Mary Cole*, is a twelve-page pamphlet, which consists of three untitled sections narrated entirely in the first person. The initial

¹ This reconstruction of the events is entirely based on Cole 1812: 1-3.



one, composed as a hearsay report of the crime, is replete with misspellings and inconsistencies that clearly demonstrate how far removed the author was from the actual events. The next two pages contain an analogously vague second-hand report of selected moments of the trial, while the remaining pages present a "Journal and Confession" taken down by an anonymous "person who attended Mary Cole while in prison and to the place of execution" (5). Given its indirect nature, the text does not provide any new information either on the circumstances surrounding the deed or on the motive; however, its very production is certainly a testament to the notoriety of the case in the country.

A matricide case was indeed relevant to the coeval readership. Among the political, social, and cultural changes that characterized the early-Republic years, a transformational era indeed (Wood 1982: 12-13), was a process of reconsideration of familial relations and parental authority. This was inspired by the ideological heritage of the major pedagogical theories (Fliegelman 1982: 12) that made their way across the ocean mainly thanks to the English novelistic production of the second half of the eighteenth century, marked by an unparalleled interest in the dynamics of family relationships (Fliegelman 1982: 36).

In his seminal work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke imposed a "sensationalist model" of the mind (Fliegelman 1982: 36). This perspective suggests that the human mind is not formed at birth but, on the contrary, is a blank slate "receptive to inscriptions and reinscriptions" (Brown 2001: 31), i.e. to the experiences of the senses. The receipt of sense input – in other terms, of information about the primary and secondary qualities of things – enables the production of generalizations, i.e., ideas. In this light, Locke postulated the relevance of those "little and almost insensible Impressions on [...] tender infancies" which "have very important and lasting consequences" (§ 1). This led him to the conclusion that education must be based not on imposition, on "precept", but on "parental example," (qtd. in Fliegelman 1982: 13): the parents' behaviors provide the stimuli that impress the earliest teachings on the infant's mind. Within his epistemology, the downside of the human mind's receptivity was that an early exposure to the wrong stimuli might corrupt it irreparably. Since, according to Locke, only education made virtue possible (Fliegelman 1982: 15), it was essential that the human mind be properly formed starting from its earliest stages of development.

This preoccupation with the notion of nurture informed the contribution of another school of thought besides Locke's: that of the Scottish Common Sense Movement. According to Francis Hutcheson (Bloch 1987: 50), human beings act on "an instinct towards happiness" (Monro 1972: 92), a "sixth common sense, antecedent to rational judgment, called the moral sense, or affection" (Fliegelman 1982: 24). It is an inborn drive toward sociability, which induces human beings to acknowledge their own existence in relationship to others, and thus to pursue the pleasure of company (Fliegelman 1982: 24). This natural sociability stems from the mutual attachment and



affection that characterize the dynamics of the parent-child dyad. Hutcheson contends that the parent-child relationship serves as the ideal paradigm for all of the social relations of adult life. Seen in this light, parental negligence becomes an utter perversion, and, given the exemplary nature of the bond at issue, a threat to the integrity of society (Fliegelman 1982: 25). In what is no coincidence, as Fliegelman maintains (118), the theme of unnatural parents was made into a literary motif that became very popular in English fiction during the last third of the eighteenth century.

The relationship between parental nurture – above all the lack of it – and the moral development of the individual into adulthood is of particular interest to both of these trial reports, especially to their presentation of the mother-daughter dyad composed of the victim, Agnes Thuers, and her daughter, Mary Cole. As I intend to demonstrate, the strategies and techniques employed to construct, fictionalize, and present this relationship to the reading public offer a privileged insight into the dominant familial and gender ideologies of the time. In that respect, it is my contention that both crime narratives constitute a solid cultural document of the early-Republic era.

The secularization of the approach to crime in the narratives published in the early 1800s put the spotlight on etiology. Underlying the most frequent explanations for murder were three, often overlapping, factors: the environmental influences on the individual's character, the motive, and the inability to govern the passions (Halttunen 1993: 81).

All of these are worked, although somewhat indiscriminately, into *A Genuine Sketch*. The sections entitled respectively "Her Dying Speech" and "Some Serious Remarks", focus on the matricide's last words before the execution, and are intended to offer an environmental explanation of the criminal's actions. As was often the case, the last words of the convict permitted "the lawbreaker to become the law-affirmer, the liar to be the speaker of final truths" (Davis 1957: 123, qtd. in Fabian 2000: 49). In that respect, Mary Cole is no exception. Both of the sections mentioned above are informed by the same agenda: to induce readers to empathize with the defendant by putting the blame on the injured party, Agnes Thuers, and to recast the offender as the actual victim. The arguments employed appeal to dominant ideologies concerning women's role in society: the core of Cole's defensive strategy is Thuers's alleged failure to conform to the current ideal of motherhood.

The early-Republic era saw "the glorification of the motherly role [...], a phenomenon that can be read as a subtle means of social control of women, intended to keep them within the boundaries of the prescribed gender norm" (Kerber 1976: 201; Lindenauer 2013: 15). The chief ideal was that of the so-called "Republican mother", a term coined by Linda Kerber (1976) to describe the peculiar political mission assigned to American women in the 1780s and 1790s. United in the conviction that "virtue was the most valued quality defining individual commitment to the American republican cause" (Bloch 1987: 41), contemporary leaders worked to ensure that the following



generations of Americans continued to demonstrate the ethics that a republic required (Kerber 1980: 199). From their perspective, churches, schools and families – and within families, women – came to epitomize civic virtue (Kerber 1980: 199).

Mothers in particular became the keystones of a new “gendered” form of virtue (Bloch 1987: 37-58), which permitted them to serve the nation despite their formal exclusion from active participation in the public sphere (Bloch 1987: 46). Intended as a feminine prerogative, this virtue was not conceived in the Lockean sense, as the product of the workings of human reason, but as a direct consequence of an emotion,² i.e., the aforementioned “instinct towards happiness” which, as claimed by the Scottish philosophical school, was to be a polar star, pointing the way towards good. Accordingly, the Republican mothers’ *raison d’être* was to raise children and discipline husbands to be virtuous citizens of the nation (Kerber 1976: 203).

If the future of the Republic indeed depended on motherhood, it was mandatory that prospective and/or new mothers be prepared for the role (Kerber 1976: 201). Notably, the year before the Cole tragedy saw the publication of the first manual of childcare in the history of the nation, *The Maternal Physician*. The most striking aspect of the text is the unprecedentedly emotional rhetoric employed by the author to depict maternity as a state of bliss (Palmer Tyler 1811: 12) inspired by the “passionate attachment” (Lebsock 1985: 159) unique to the mother-child dyad. More precisely, as Leslie J. Lindenauer notes (2013: 20), “the ideal mother in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century was increasingly defined by the scope of her love: “Mother love [...] was a function of God’s will”. Interestingly, she maintains that the quintessential demonstration of maternal love was breastfeeding, “the ultimate symbol of selfless devotion to one’s child [...] and the symbol of [...] Christ’s divine love” (20). Such a conception of motherhood, as Ryan observes (1983: 125), expanded the merely domestic function attributed to American women in that it required “a great expenditure of woman’s time devoted to the observation of the infant’s health and the incessant supply of comfort” – an increasingly distant view from the “sober [...] idea of parenthood” that had characterized the colonial era (1983: 125-126).

In *A Genuine Sketch*, Thuers’s conduct as a mother is notably presented to the Republican readers as a transgression of the natural order: not only did the woman reportedly never display any maternal instinct but, after the birth of her only child, she showed a neglecting and abusive attitude towards her. In her dying speech, Cole insisted that her mother had been “deaf to the voice of nature” (1812: 10) after bringing her daughter into the world. Given the emphasis on the value of nurture at that time, it is no accident that Mary Cole defended herself by claiming that Agnes had categorically “refused [her] the breast, and neglected [her] for so long at a time, that [her] father oftentimes wept over the inhumanity of [her] mother.” (1812: 11)

² Modern dualism conceives emotion and logos as polar opposites granting the first to women and the second to men – a logic questioned by feminism. See Glennon 1979.



As far as the then current ideologies of women's role are concerned, it is important to point out that the first two decades of the nineteenth century saw the evolution of this ideal of republican motherhood into what can be read as yet another 'soft' means of social control, the principle of "true womanhood". It postulated female supremacy in piety and virtue over men: "the value of women remained rooted in virtue and in their centrality to creating a nation capable of a successful democracy [...] but the ideology [...] also embraced women as daughters, sisters, and wives. This ideal deemed piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity as key attributes of a true woman" (Sherman 2008: 60).

Interestingly, both *A Genuine Sketch* and *The Confession of Mary Cole* find Agnes Thuers also wanting in that respect. First of all, Agnes shows neither love nor deference for her husband; their union challenges the Protestant belief in the "mutual comfort" between man and wife (Lewis 1987: 695) as one of the fundamental purposes of the marriage institution. In addition, Agnes's bearing defies the traditional norm of the "good wife" (Ulrich 1991: 10) that had dominated the American scene since the colonial period, which postulated women's subordination to men as a "religious duty" (Ulrich 1991: 15). Reportedly, Thuers disrupted the social equilibrium by keeping her consort "under [her] absolute control" (1812: 11): not only did she constantly boss him around, often compelling him to do chores for her (1812: 11-12), but she cornered him into the unnatural role of sole nurturer and caregiver of their child. It was the "dear and tenderhearted" man (1812: 12), the closest to a maternal figure that Mary had ever experienced, who saved the newborn Mary from starvation by feeding her with a "sugar teat" and, subsequently, by sending her to her grandmother's until she was old enough to "ask for bread" (1812: 11) herself. Tireless in her domineering attitude, Agnes went as far as to withhold food from him, so much so that little Mary had to resort to sneaking food to her own father (1812: 11).

This representation raises the issue of tyranny, which was particularly relevant in the post-revolutionary nation. The dominant Republican political idea stated that, as Lewis (1987: 694) puts it, "tyranny presented the most immediate and obvious threat to American happiness" and, accordingly, it was perfectly legitimate to rise against it. As America had defied the patriarchal authority of King George, Revolutionary rhetoric now justified the rebellion of children against strict and inhuman parents (Bryant 2004: 263; Fliegelman 1982: 118). Both pamphlets make ample use of this rhetoric, by including Thuers's domestic despotism among the triggering factors of her daughter's violent act, thereby corroborating the arguments pursued by the defense.

Mary's father, whom she depicts in palpably affectionate tones, seems in turn to embody some of the Republican qualities of the ideal husband: "virtuous conduct, good temper, discretion, regularity and industry and a mild and even disposition" (Lewis 1987: 696). It was the pious man, devoted "to God and heavenly things" (1812: 11), who tried in vain to redeem his wife by gently calling her to the Sabbath religious service: "Come let us read God's word, and some good books to day, for it is a good



day, and God will bless us (1812: 11). It goes without saying that this reference to Thuers's alleged neglect of her religious duties perfectly fits the portrait of 'unnatural mother' outlined by Cole's defensive strategy.

The kind man, who had buffered Mary from her mother's cruelty for years, died prematurely, leaving her vulnerable to the woman's despotism. Hoping to escape her dreadful family situation, Mary decided to marry Cornelius Cole. Unfortunately, even after the wedding, her mother reportedly continued in her evil ways (Cole 1812, 10-11). With an abundance of details that was typical of murder literature between 1750 and 1820 (Halitunen 1998: 38), readers are made aware that Agnes cunningly made her way into Mary and her husband's marital dwelling. It appears that the old woman undertook to sow discord between them, going as far as to question the paternity of her grandchildren by insisting to her son-in-law that Mary had been "false to his bed" (1812: 12). Her alleged interference is made worse in *The Confession*, where it is stated that old lady insisted on sharing the couple's bed rather than sleeping in her own (1813: 5).

Interestingly, most of the characteristics ascribed to Agnes Thuers in the pamphlet can be found, almost identically, in the representation of the "unnatural mother" *par excellence*, i.e. the "stepmother". This trope, very frequent in popular literature of the early Republic, fulfilled a cautionary function: the negative connotation attached to it appeared as a kind of sanction aimed at deterring women's ambitions to more power and authority within society (Lindenauer 2013: 16). In what is no coincidence, it stood in sharp contrast with the dominant ideal of motherhood: "Pure. Selfless. Natural. Affectionate. These words [...] were qualities literary stepmothers did not possess [...]. The "substitute mother" [...] was heir to those qualities most identified with old-world monarchy: she was tyrannical, corrupt, avaricious, and selfish" (16). Besides these characteristics, the trait that best distinguished 'stepmothers' was that they were lacking in "maternal love". In so being, "they did not deserve the name of 'mother'" (16).

That is also the case with Agnes Thuers, who amply proves to be undeserving of being called a mother. In addition to affective disconnection, tyranny, greediness, and impiety, Cole's defense ascribes to her a death wish for her own flesh and blood. In *A Genuine Sketch*, Mary Cole explains Thuers's refusal to breastfeed her infant daughter with a "desire to see her [...] breathe [her] last" (10). The charge of attempted murder is explicitly repeated in both pamphlets. In her dying speech, Cole states the following: "I must die; but I had not ought to die; for she came at me with a knife, to kill me, and I did it to save my life" (10). Her words refer to an incident in which an incensed Agnes reportedly flung a pair of bellows at Mary, who was holding both her babies. In order to fend off the blow, she was forced to drop one of them. The final straw was when her mother reportedly came at her with a knife, allegedly to kill her. Eventually, in exasperation, Mary struck her with axe and finished her off with a jack knife (14).



The old woman's *persona* is fictionalized as perverse creature who, acting in open defiance of Nature and, by extension, of God's will, pursues the evil, sacrilegious intent of terminating the existence of her own progeny, of the daughter who should have been, instead, her reason to live. Clearly, the strategic intent behind this representation is to appeal to a negative model – the stepmother – with which the juries were already amply familiar and to expand it in order to create a "fictional monster" (Cutter 1999: 61) that could deflect attention away from the actual monster – the matricide, Mary Cole.

In so doing, her attorneys intended to present the incident as a desperate attempt at self-defense after a lifetime of abuse. It should come as no surprise, then, that in both pamphlets the murderess does not admit to any responsibility or guilt for the crime. From her perspective, her mother brought her appalling end upon herself, as the final act of a tragedy of cruelty and human misery. "What should we do?" she said in an attempt to explain her course of action, "We could not live so any longer" (1812: 4).

The lawyers supported their argument by asserting that the matricide had been committed "in an intoxication of passion:" "The awful deed was begun and finished before reason had time to resume its office" (1812: 6). From their perspective, the defendant had been provoked into a paroxysm of rage and violence by her mother's physical attack. Their agenda was to rule malice aforethought out in order to have the murder charge reduced to manslaughter. Accordingly, they reported (1812: 6) several cases in which juries had convicted the defendant for manslaughter rather than murder "because the accused had reasons for anger and, in his rage, slew or took the life of another". They even recalled the case of a man who was charged with manslaughter and not murder for killing another in a fit of rage for trivial reasons, i.e., for "ringing" his nose. In this light, they insisted (1812: 6), "it would doubtless appear to the jury that the offense given by the man who rung the other's nose could in no shape hold a parallel with the offense given the Prisoner by her mother".

This strategy was not effective, presumably for two main reasons: first of all, because in *Her Dying Speech*, Mary herself admits to having given a lot of thought to how to get rid of her mother. She disclosed her and her husband's resolution "to murder her" and describes how they dug a hole under the kitchen floor "to bury her in" (1812: 4). Even if Mary reportedly abandoned herself to violence only when her mother attacked her with a knife, malice aforethought could not be taken out of the picture.

The second reason that invalidates the "intoxication of passion" explanation for the killing is that it implies a set of ideas not particularly befitting a woman defendant (Cutter 1999: 59-69). In order to explain and justify the matricide, Mary's legal representatives could simply have appealed to the lack of maternal love and nurture that she suffered throughout her childhood and youth – itself an abomination according to the main pedagogic theories of the time. This explanation could have



substantiated not only the defendant's appalling act of violence, but also the conspicuous (and suspicious) lack of any expression of guilt or regret.

Yet, no such argument was employed. The lawyers resorted instead to the theories of Frances Hutcheson, especially in regards to the postulated relationship between morality and emotions. In the Scot's view (2002: 31), passion encompasses "a confused Sensation either of Pleasure or Pain [...] which [...] prolongs or strengthens the Affection sometimes to such a degree, as to prevent all deliberate Reasoning about our Conduct".

According to the attorneys' interpretation, as had been the case with the legal precedents previously mentioned, Cole's moral sense had been temporarily impaired by an emotional upsurge caused by Thuer's aggression. This comparison poses problems in that it employs instances of crimes committed by men and not by women (Cutter 1999: 59-60). As I have tried to prove, the widely accepted theory that linked emotions with moral sense also postulated women's superiority to men in terms of virtue. In light of this ideology, if women were morally worthier than men – and even more so mothers, such as Mary Cole – they should not fall prey to the same mistakes. If we pursue this line of reasoning to its logical termination, we will come to the conclusion that Mary's behavior denotes a serious lack of moral sense, a failure to conform to the ideal of the "true woman". This must have considerably influenced the jury against her, even more so considering that the Anglo-American legal system was male-dominated, and women were excluded from the courtroom as attorneys, judges or clerks (Kerber 1980: 152). Not being considered political beings, they were not admitted to jury duty either: this implied that women could not be tried before their peers (Kerber 1980: 152).

That Mary did not fulfill the ideal of "true womanhood" appears evident from both *A Genuine Sketch* and *The Confession*. While on the one hand she appeared to be a devoted wife and mother, on the other hand both narratives suggest, explicitly and implicitly, that she had an evil streak. Both the attorneys for the defense and the crime pamphlets seemed unable to reconcile these two facets of Mary's identity: the Republican mother and the matricide (Cutter 1999: 63).

This inconsistency is represented in both texts by means of rhetorical constructions pertaining to the gothic genre (Bryant 2004: 255). The employment of gothic elements to confront murder was not new: on the contrary, it was inspired by the popular murder publications printed in England since the seventeenth century (Cohen 2003: 31-55). Within the gothic frame, Halttunen (1998: 3) singles out two main narrative conventions: horror and mystery. The former is utilized to instruct the readers into the right attitude towards crime by firstly arousing in them a reaction of fear, hatred, and disgust (3-4). The latter makes a deliberate use of confused, incomplete and contradictory narratives in order to persuade the reader of the intrinsic opacity of the criminal phenomena (3).



The Confession is explicitly gothic in terms of structure and content (Bryant 2004: 260). It opens with the subtitle "Savage Brutality", which sets the mood for a depiction of Mary Cole as the perpetrator of "the most shocking, inhuman and unnatural murder" (1). Clearly wanting in linearity and coherence, the narration provides an account of the events leading up to the murder that mixes up, without a definite rationale, the victim's financial dealings with her son-in-law with the mysterious circumstances of her disappearance and the Coles' departure from Sussex County. The text moves on to the discovery of the corpse and, subsequently, to the official inquest and the indictment of the couple for "willful murder", only to return, again, to the discovery of the body and the arrest of the couple. The pamphlet ends with a report of the defendant's confession, actually a chronicle of the circumstances of the murder and the attempt at cover-up, which contributes nothing to the analysis of the case, but allows for a string of lurid details of the massacre: e.g., the cruelty of the matricide's fatal blow, which "cut her throat from ear to ear" (2), and the abundance of blood, which left the murderess "bloody from [...]" her "shoulders down" (3).

The Confession leaves questions unanswered about the motive of the matricide. While there is no doubt as to who committed the crime, the vague timeline induces the readers to construe the text as a mystery (Bryant 2004: 260), that is, precisely as one of the two main literary conventions previously ascribed to the gothic. Importantly, the lack of any explanation for the appalling crime prevents any possibility of moral identification with the murderess, who emerges from the text as an inexplicable manifestation of social deviance. In what is no accident, her eyes, which, as the narrator maintains, "were so wild and distorted, as to appear [...] like two balls of fire" (16), can be read as a synecdoche of her evil side, which singles her out as a "moral alien" (Halttunen 1998: 57).

Goddu (1997: 10) aptly notes the potential inherent in gothic genre of "speaking the unspeakable", i.e. of giving a literary voice to cultural contradictions (13) that often remain unexpressed. In that respect, *Mary's Farewell Letter to Her Husband* constitutes a paradigmatic example:

– If you live to return home again, do be sure to mind what I say; don't you leave our babe, [...] stay with your child, all things in the world notwithstanding... you must be father and mother both, and I fear its only friend; when it weeps, kiss it for me and rock it silent for me when I am in the cold and silent grave. – O Cornelius, above all things, don't forget to observe and obey the scriptures, which say, "parents provoke not your children." I send you here a lock of my hair, which I want you to keep so long as you live; and when you are tempted to go from your dear babe, first look on a part of its poor unfortunate mother, which will stand as a living monument of my wishes, when worms are devouring my flesh (Cole 1812: 9)



As Julia Kristeva suggests, the “abject is marked by a revolt within language, a crisis of the word or the shattering or impossibility of narrative” (1982: 208, qtd. in Goddu 1997: 19). In this case, the “abject”, or “the in-between, the ambiguous” (Kristeva 1982: 4, qtd. in Goddu 1997: 20) emerges in the distortion of the traditional language of motherhood with horrific images intended to create a strident, disturbing, typically gothic effect.

While the narrating voice in the text is certainly that of a dying mother worried about the future of her child, her tone and choice of words might also suggest her latent resentment towards her husband, who got away with a very lenient sentence after disclaiming any direct responsibility in the murder. For example, in the opening of the excerpt, Mary questions the very fact that he will survive the two-year incarceration. Accordingly, her recommendation to “provoke not” one’s children could be interpreted both as a cautionary warning and a subtle threat, if not an implicit wish of Thuer’s tragic destiny on Cornelius himself if he fails in his fatherly job. Besides, even her warm appeal to parental tenderness and affection for their son is immediately contrasted with a macabre image of her future dwelling, the grave. Finally, the lock of her hair left to Cornelius, traditionally a token of affection and remembrance, might be construed as a threatening reminder of what his destiny might be like if he were to neglect his duty to his son: a worm-eaten body decaying in a cold grave.

As I have tried to demonstrate, both *A Genuine Sketch* and *The Confession* constitute valid cultural documents of the early-Republic ethos. On the one hand, they offer a privileged insight into the dominant social ideologies of the era, especially with regard to familial relations and parental authority, which were undergoing a process of reconsideration inspired by the ideological resonance of the major pedagogical theories of the time. On the other hand, both pamphlets clearly point to the difficulty of a society still in the process of consolidating its identity to come to terms with the tensions and contradictions ensuing from the ongoing paradigm shifts.

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