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Religion and the Maintenance of Hierarchy in Murder Pamphlets in Renaissance England

Abstract

In early modern England, common people often received news of current events through cheaply printed and widely distributed pamphlets. The more interesting of these pamphlets were entirely devoted to relating stories of recent crimes, especially murders.

While at first reading [one such] pamphlet appears to be a simple news tabloid, it is, under the surface, much more. Murder pamphlets such as *A Briefe Discourse* served as messages to the public, instilling religious morals and the importance of maintaining the Great Chain of Being.

Religion and the Maintenance of Hierarchy in Murder Pamphlets in Renaissance England

Jennifer Black

In early modern England, common people often received news of current events through cheaply printed and widely distributed pamphlets. The more interesting of these pamphlets were entirely devoted to relating stories of recent crimes, especially murders. These publications would “appear with remarkable speed, sometimes as soon as days after a crime” was discovered, before it had even been taken to trial.¹ One such pamphlet is *A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers, committed bothe in Worcestershire, and bothe happening unhappily in the yeare. 1583.*, which was written by an anonymous author and published in London by Roger Warde in 1583. This particular pamphlet describes two murders, one of Robert Greenoll by his neighbor, Thomas Smith, and the other of Thomas Beast by his servant, Christopher Tomson, in conspiracy with Mrs. Beast. These two accounts are preceded by a forward addressed “To the Reader,”² in which the author lectures the reader on Scripture and offers the following reports as a warning that those reading it must “call for the grace of our heauenly father, to strengthen vs with such assured confidence, that we” the readers will not succumb to the Devil as did those who committed the terrible crimes reported in the pamphlet.³ While at first reading this pamphlet appears to be a simple news tabloid, it is, under the surface, much more. Murder pamphlets such as *A Briefe Discourse* served as messages to the public, instilling religious morals and the importance of maintaining the Great Chain of Being.

The first crime described in the pamphlet is the murder of Robert Greenoll, a young textile merchant, by his neighbor, Thomas Smith. According to the pamphlet, Greenoll was well-liked by neighbors and did well in his business. Smith became jealous of Greenoll’s prosperity, and “the Deuill so farre ruled the course of his enuious intent, as nothing wold suffise the desire thereof, but onely making away of Greenoll by death.”⁴ Since “the Deuill wanteth no occasions to helpe man forward to his own destruction,”⁵ Smith then lured Greenoll to his home on New Year’s Eve under the pretense of celebrating the night together with drinks. When an opportunity presented itself, Smith took an iron pestle and gave Greenoll “two suche mightie blowes on the heade, as hee fell down backward to the ground.”⁶ After a brief moment of regret for his actions, Smith

1. Frances E. Dolan, “Tracking the Petty Traitor across Genres,” in *Ballads and Broad-sides in Britain, 1500-1800*, ed. Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, and Kris McAbee (Ashgate, 2010), 151.

2. *A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers, committed bothe in Worcestershire, and bothe happening unhappily in the yeare. 1583.*, A2r.

3. *Ibid.*, A4r.

4. *Ibid.*, A5r.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, A6v.

decided to finish the act, beating Greenoll again with the pestle, attempting and failing to slit his throat, and finally stabbing him through the heart.⁷ Smith then buried Greenoll's body in his cellar "where his grave was readie prepared for him."⁸ Smith then went to Greenoll's home and robbed it, calling out to the night watchmen so "that hee might goe by them unseene, when he carryed the goods out of Greenols shop to his owne house."⁹

The following morning, upon the townspeople's discovery of the robbery of Greenoll's shop, the watchman revealed that he had seen Smith about the night before. Smith was sent for, and he informed the investigators that they could not search his house but were free to search his cellar "and so tooke the keyes from his girdle and threw them unto them."¹⁰ The investigators, of course, discovered Greenoll's body in its shallow grave, and Smith was imprisoned until his trial, during which "he was condemned to the death."¹¹ Smith was also sentenced to be hanged in chains, but, thanks to the influence of wealthy friends, he was only "hanged to death, and afterward buried."¹²

The lengthy religious lecture preceding the news stories and the repeated mention of the Devil entering the criminals discussed were meant to influence readers' actions and morals, acting as religious propaganda. These descriptions exemplify the "characteristically Protestant concept of the Devil that was centered around the notion of temptation,"¹³ in this case temptation to murder those envied and as a result of lust, which were both capital sins. According to Malcolm Gaskill, murder pamphlets were a tool to assert that the power of God could win over any sin on earth and instill Protestantism "in the most theologically unsophisticated mind."¹⁴ Additionally, "belief in an essentially amateur, informal and haphazard system of secular law enforcement was strengthened by the assurance that even the most devious murderer would not escape temporal justice."¹⁵ The pamphlets were a way of subliminally reminding the masses that God's power, represented in the justice system, trumped all. They were, according to Frances E. Dolan, an opportunity "to present a unified, unambiguous perspective on petty treason, which reassures readers that it is unjustifiable and that it will always be found out and punished."¹⁶

The report of Smith's crime is followed by another account, this one relat-

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., A7r.

9. Ibid., A7v-A8r.

10. Ibid., A8v.

11. Ibid., B.

12. Ibid., B1.

13. Nathan Johnstone, "The Protestant Devil: The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 2 (April 2004): 175.

14. Malcolm Gaskill, "Reporting Murder: Fiction in the Archives in Early Modern England," *Social History* 23, no. 1 (January 1998): 5.

15. Ibid.

16. Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 48.

ing the death of Thomas Beast. According to the pamphlet, Beast employed a servant named Christopher Tomson to whom, due to the “prouocation of the Deuill,” Beast’s wife exhibited “far better affection, then to her owne Husband.”¹⁷ Mrs. Beast and Tomson “would carnally acquaint them selves together,” eventually causing Mrs. Beast to desire the death of her husband.¹⁸ Although Tomson took some convincing, the adulteress promised that she would use money and powerful friends to save him, and they could “liue merrily together” if he only would dispatch her husband.¹⁹ Tomson agreed, and bludgeoned his master with a bill that had been “made very sharp.”²⁰ Upon his nearly immediate arrest, Tomson “exclaimed on his Mistres, how she was cause that he committed the deed,” and she was arrested as well.²¹ The pamphleteer relates that Beast and Tomson carried on their love affair in prison, until Tomson was brought back to the scene of the crime, “there to be first hanged dead, & afterward to be hanged up againe in chaines” and Beast was “bound to the stake, & the fire made to burne about her.”²²

While the murder of Greenoll served as a way to demonstrate the punishment for violating religious and civil law, the second event detailed in this pamphlet demonstrates the consequences of violating the class and gender boundaries. Petty treason, the category of crime of which Mrs. Beast, and probably her lover, were convicted, was one way of ensuring that those of lower status (namely, servants, and, more emphatically, women) remained in their place in the established social hierarchy. Beginning in about 1550, “early modern England witnessed a crisis of order, focusing on gender relations.”²³ Since the 1300s, laws had been in place labeling certain crimes, including the murder of one’s husband or master, “as capital offenses.”²⁴ Conversely, men who murdered their wives were merely charged with capital murder.²⁵ However, “in the sixteenth century it was re-emphasized that these crimes attacked the social order.”²⁶ Women who were convicted of these offenses, called petty treason, were, like Mrs. Beast, burned at the stake, which was the same punishment a woman would receive for committing high treason. Conversely, while males convicted of high treason were hanged, drawn, and quartered, those who committed petty treason were hanged, which was the punishment for any ordinary murder. This demonstrates that, “for men, petty treason was more like murder than it was like

17. *Ibid.*, B2v.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, B3r.

20. *Ibid.*, B3v.

21. *Ibid.*, B4r.

22. *Ibid.*, B4v.

23. *Ibid.*, 17.

24. *Ibid.*, 2.

25. Stuart A. Kane, “Wives with Knives: Early Modern Murder Ballads and the Transgressive Commodity,” *Criticism* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 223.

26. Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 210.

treason.”²⁷ Petty traitors, both murderous wives and rebellious servants, caused “a violent and transgressive inversion of hierarchy,”²⁸ disrupting, in the case of a married couple, “not just the husband’s body but aspects of the political technology which constructs and maintains that body.”²⁹ To rebel against a husband or master was to remove oneself from the hierarchical position to which one had been assigned, disturbing, in the eyes of many, the fundamental way in which the society was able to function.

An important underlying concept of petty treason as reported in murder pamphlets was female sexual power and desire. According to Dolan, “the rapid shift from Mrs. Beast’s desire for another man to her loathing for her husband and then to her plan to kill him succinctly exemplifies how these texts associate female sexual desire that quests beyond marriage with violence.”³⁰ She further speculates that the interest in petty traitors’ executions “functioned as an outlet for concerns about female authority,”³¹ as the power of men over women, the powerful over the meek, was reasserted in the justice system. The inclusion of petty treason in murder pamphlets such as *A Briefe Discourse of Two most cruell and bloudie murthers* also likely acted as a warning to others who might think to rebel against those above them in the Great Chain of Being.

While *A Briefe Discourse*, like many contemporary pamphlets, appears to be a rather sensationalist bit of news reporting, it also serves as propaganda to remind the masses that God and Protestantism trump all. It warns that those who seek to disturb the “natural” order of society and violate the established hierarchy will be discovered and punished for their actions.

27. Dolan, “Tracking the Petty Traitor across Genres,” 153.

28. Kane, “Wives with Knives,” 224.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 40.

31. Dolan, “Tracking the Petty Traitor across Genres,” 154.