CONSTRUCTIONS OF INFANTICIDE IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND:
FEMALE DEVIANCE DURING DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Infanticide was rare in early modern England, yet it occupied a prominent position in English culture. Ambiguities surrounding the birth and death of an infant permitted multiple interpretations of suspicious evidence. At times communities, the justice system, and the law formed competing narratives of an infant’s birth and death. Narratives circulating in popular print promoted yet another interpretation of events.

This essay explores narratives of infanticide, real and imagined, official and unofficial, in order to understand why the English were so preoccupied by infanticide. What was at stake? As communities dealt sympathetically with many suspected murderers, popular print demonized them. We can better understand the competing constructions of infanticide by placing them in the context of the demographic crisis of the seventeenth century. Communities and the justice system had to cope with real people with real problems. Popular print provided an outlet for administering justice that appeased divine wrath.
For Will, with love.

And for my family, who first showed me love.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE PROBLEM AND METHOD

Newborn child murder may have been rare in early modern England, but there is little doubt that it happened.\(^1\) Evidence of it exists in the judicial records, as it was criminalized by the legal code. The murder of children also weighed heavily in the cultural imagination of the English, where it surfaced in sermons, ballads, and pamphlets. Yet it is difficult to determine the details of why it happened because infanticide was taboo in England’s legal-minded, Christian society.\(^2\) Historians can unfortunately only surmise the motivations of the men and women who murdered infants. No suspected murderer left an honest, private appraisal of why he or she did it; no man or woman who considered infanticide explained why he or she decided against it.

\(^{1}\) The current scholarly consensus is that the murder of children of any age was relatively rare in English society. This point of view was first advocated by Keith Wrightson in his “Infanticide in Early Modern Europe,” 14-15. He took issue with the work of Barbara Kellum (“Infanticide in England in the Later Middle Ages”), Lawrence Stone (The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800), and others who have preferred to characterize early modern parents as indifferent (at best) and calculatingly cruel (at worst).

\(^{2}\) Jim Sharpe uses the term “legal-mindedness” to refer to the wide familiarity with and unusual respect for the law among the English. The English regarded their King’s courts as effective and just arbiters of all manner of disputes in an era when, on the other hand, many European societies avoided resorting to, or aiding, law enforcement. Sharpe, “Enforcing the Law,” 101-102. On law and society in Continental Europe, see Lenman and Parker, “The State, the Community and the Criminal Law,” 16-22.
If historians cannot readily answer why individuals murdered infants, what other approaches to the study of infanticide might yield fruitful results? Several historians have found that a more promising task is to attempt to reconstruct how newborn child murder happened. They have attempted to recreate the typical infanticide scenario using court records, which theoretically recorded the details of individual cases. Nevertheless, one should be wary of placing too much confidence in the accuracy of the resulting descriptive narrative due to the realities of under-reporting, misrepresentation by law clerks, and the attrition of records over time. It is disappointing that a completely accurate statistical reconstruction of the incidence of infanticide in early modern England is likely impossible, as it could offer another intriguing window into extramarital sexuality and pregnancy management, subjects historians have only been able to estimate through studies of its quantifiable results,

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4 In the introductory volume to his edited series Calendar of Assize Records: Home Circuit Indictments, Elizabeth I and James I (p.76-86), J.S. Cockburn has an interesting discussion of the problems that bombard the historian who attempts to use indictments and other formal court records to reconstruct criminal patterns during the period under observation. Most significantly, indictments were legally required (I Hen. V, c.5) to include a precise “addition” – which was supposed to describe the estate, degree, or occupation of the accused and the locations associated with him or her (e.g., where the accused resided, where the crime took place, etc.). Without an addition, the indictment was invalid. The legal requirement of the addition at first seems like a boon to the historian attempting to write a social history of crime, but in actuality it serves most often to lead the historian astray. Cockburn summarizes scholarship that has effectively demonstrated that many, if not most, additions in indictments were spurious, invented by clerks hastily attempting to fulfill the formal requirements of a superficially valid indictment. Even a detail as straightforward as an accused woman’s marital status cannot be reliably determined from the records. If challenged, these indictments had to be dismissed, as they were invalid (in content, not in form) in a court of law. Despite their gross inaccuracy, these indictments were rarely challenged.
such as illegitimate births. The study of child murder, however, is not completely useless. There is a more important question lurking among the unanswerable ones. Rather than statistically describing the deed or reconstructing the infanticide’s motivations, it is just as valuable to probe the meanings observers constructed around it. Everyone with ears to hear or eyes to see knew that infants were occasionally murdered in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. What did this deed mean to everyday people? Were they indifferent? Were they sympathetic to the plight of the murderer? Were they outraged?

This essay will explore the ambiguities attending infanticides, real and imagined, in early modern England. The discussion will pivot on the seventeenth century. It is important to remember that infanticide was not a new problem in the seventeenth century, nor did it disappear in the centuries following. Neither were the ambiguities of the typical victim’s birth and death unique to that era. What sets this period of English history apart from those occurring before and after is the cultural preoccupation with infanticide. Its prominence in the English cultural imagination resulted from two important crises in the seventeenth century. First, the demographic crisis brought the rate of newborn child murder to its height. Although still a rare occurrence, more and more communities were forced to deal with infanticide.

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5 Richard Adair has provided the most recent and comprehensive account in Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England. See also Peter Laslett’s classic Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

6 Although ambiguities were reduced somewhat as medical knowledge advanced in the eighteenth century, Western medicine has only in the past few years reached the point where it can identify the cause of infant deaths with some certainty. Roth, “Child Murder in New England,” 101-102. Jackson, Infanticide ("The Trial of Harriet Vooght," 9; “Nothing in between: Modern Cases of Infanticide,” 273). For an extended discussion of medical advances in the eighteenth century, see Jackson, Newborn Child Murder, 84-103.
Second, the increasingly explosive struggle over religion affected how people imagined Satan working in their midst to turn England away from God. Murdered infants were tangible evidence of Satan sowing wickedness and violence against God’s creation. Anxieties over the godliness of English society intersected with the very real problem of finding enough food for everyone to eat.

The present essay will explore cultural constructions of infanticide circulating in early modern England; along the way it will examine a variety of narrative genres for evidence of how the English constructed meanings for the deed. Instead of scrutinizing judicial records for evidence of “what happened” – who killed whom, how and when – I looked for clues to the meanings that people made of the evidence they encountered.7 The stories people related about suspicious births and deaths of infants betray a great deal about how meanings were generated, as narrative is man’s most powerful tool for creating meaning. What was important? Why did they react in a certain way? At times, it will be necessary to contrast narratives with reactions because what people said is in conflict with what people did. Through the stories, I have tried to come to grips with how those accused of infanticide, their communities, judges and juries negotiated the implications of 1624 “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children.”8

The essay would be incomplete without an exploration of the rich language of popular pamphlets dealing with infanticide. It is not insignificant that the earliest example of these popular pamphlets is from 1609. The elaborate and unforgiving

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7 Unfortunately, I did not have access to these records directly, so I relied heavily on the evidence processed by Keith Wrightson, Laura Gowing, and David Cressy in this portion of my essay.

8 21 Jac I c.27. See Appendix A to this essay (p.61) for the complete statute.
narratives are relatively evenly dispersed throughout the seventeenth century; the journalistic reports of trial proceedings and hangings proliferated after the 1670s. By 1700 the damning tone and inflexible moral position of the pamphleteers gave way almost exclusively to publications that simply chronicled infanticides among other felonies and record the total number of persons executed or deported.

Many of these pamphlets have been examined before, but for different academic ends. In “Early Modern Medea: Representation of Child Murder in the Street Literature of Seventeenth-Century England,” Susan Staub elucidates how the popular press employed these narratives to circumscribe the authority of the mother and emphasize her acceptable role of submissive wife. In the Anti-Christ’s Lewd Hat, Peter Lake discusses at length how religious conflicts and anxieties were explored and played out in murder pamphlets generally (infanticide included). The current essay proposes, however, that these particular infanticide narratives are best understood within the context of demographic crisis. Elaborate pamphlets recounting the willful murder of innocent babes only seemed to flourish during the seventeenth century, at the same time that the incidence of infanticide was at its height. These narratives for popular consumption form an intriguing contrast to the way infanticide investigations and trials were handled in local communities. It is important to consider all of these constructions of infanticide in our attempt to understand how the people made sense of the deed.

In part, this focus on cultural constructions of infanticide is the result of limited resources for this project: the pre-trial investigations needed to sort out the ambiguous actions of affected communities and representatives of the law are located
in English archives. In part, the focus on culture is my concession to the fact that historians will never really know the full extent of infanticide and all of its many manifestations. In the end, I have decided that what is most valuable about the study of deviance is what it can tell us about everyday life. People do not tend to record the obvious or the normative. When it comes to very personal matters such as sexual relationships and domestic arrangements, it can be even more difficult to determine what was “normal.” There are, of course, many recognized interpretation issues when dealing with prescriptive sources, such as childrearing manuals. Are they reacting to a perceived deficiency in society? Are they describing the way it used to be? I have avoided these issues by coming at the issue of normative behavior through the back door: by looking at the ways that the English contrasted the deviant with the ideal in popular discourse. This method is not without its problems, but it presents another opportunity to triangulate evidence about such hazy topics as sexual behavior and family life. For me, determining the cultural significance of infanticide became a much more important issue than discovering the relative statistical significance of the marital status of the accused murderer or confirming that there was no gender bias among infants killed. When the rarity of infanticide is factored into the equation, it seems much more relevant to ask, “What was all the fuss about?”

The decision to approach the topic from a cultural perspective also resulted from a review of the existing scholarship on infanticide. The cultural aspects of this

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9 There are several historians doing solid research into recovering communities’ constructions of infanticide using the reports from eighteenth century pre-trial investigations, such as Tim Siddons, “Male Involvement in the Commission of Suspected New-Born Child Murder in Scotland, c.1812 – c.1927” (unpublished conference paper), and Mark Jackson, New-born Child Murder. There are few historians working on this question in the seventeenth century – with the exception of Laura Gowing, whose Past and Present article “Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England” examines seventeenth-century depositions from the Northern Assize Circuit.
phenomenon have been largely ignored by historians and only briefly touched upon by literary scholars. Much ink has been spilled on the criminality of infanticide in Europe, particularly for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Just as much ink has been spent by legal and feminist historians on unpacking the implications of the 1624 “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children,” which permitted extraordinary evidentiary standards (in comparison with the rest of the English common law tradition) in order to secure conviction. As noted above, pamphlets treating the murder of infants have been recently examined, but the evidence was marshaled for very different academic debates. Peter Lake and Susan Staub want to talk about uses of infanticide in debates over religious reformation and gender; this essay explores why seventeenth century pamphleteers and their readers were preoccupied with infanticide instead of some other wicked deed. Why did these English men and women seem to care so much about such a rare occurrence as


12 21 Jac I c.27. See Appendix A to this essay (p.61) for the complete statute.

13 Witchcraft was the only other crime in which the accused had to prove him or herself innocent. Other studies have focused on the implications of the law. The feminist historiography tends to approach the question in the same way. Beattie, J.M. *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Hoffer and Hull, *Murdering Mothers*; Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records – Introduction*; Francus, “Monstrous Mothers, Monstrous Societies.”
infanticide? The current essay proposes (rather ambitiously) to rectify this gap in the literature in order to deepen our understanding of child murder and its curious position in the English cultural imagination.

Not surprisingly, observers constructed various meanings for suspected infanticide. The act elicited ambivalent responses from residents of the communities where it happened, representatives of the law, and pamphleteers. Members of Parliament constructed infanticide as an exceptional crime calling for unusual evidentiary standards to expedite capital punishment. Law enforcement and representatives of the justice system allowed for more ambiguous constructions of infanticide that permitted suspected – and often confirmed – infanticides to go free through one of the many legal loopholes available. Members of affected communities had perhaps the most complex role in constructing infanticide, as they had the first, most intimate contact with the victim and its killer. This initial struggle to make meaning often resulted in a series of nuanced, conflicted understandings of what had taken place. The least ambiguous representation of infanticide, however, circulated in the press: pamphlets, ballads, and broadsides constructed infanticide as the epitome of grossly deviant womanhood. In this popular printed matter the mother, midwife, or other woman charged with ensuring the life of the child perpetrated the inverse of social expectations. Instead of following her socially prescribed nurturing role, the murderess slaughtered the defenseless, innocent babe.
1.2 LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY UNDERSTANDINGS OF INFANTICIDE

It may be instructive to consider briefly what the word “infanticide” has signified in scholarly discourse over the past several decades. Early researchers defined “infanticide” broadly, using it to indicate the murder of a child between birth and some necessarily arbitrary “age of discretion.”\textsuperscript{14} They used it to encompass the death of a child as the result of direct homicide or willful neglect committed for any purpose by a relative, friend, or stranger. Medical doctors, anthropologists, and historians studying child murder have observed that employing such a broad category obscures behavioral patterns varying systematically according to the specific age of the child and its relationship to its killer. Following anthropological observations of infanticide in a broad range of human cultures, most scholars now make a distinction between neonaticide, the swift murder of an infant immediately after birth (up to twenty-four hours after, but usually within minutes of, separation from the mother), and filicide or pedicide, the murder of a child older than twenty-four hours but still of an age of dependence and helplessness.\textsuperscript{15} Neonaticide was and is nearly always

\textsuperscript{14} Hoffer and Hull use this most general rubric in Murdering Mothers (xiii-xix), an examination of the legal history of infanticide from its first regulation by the state under Elizabeth through the repeal of early modern statutes concerning infanticide in 1803. They define “infant” as a child under the age of nine, following justice manuals from the early modern period.

\textsuperscript{15} Jackson, Infanticide, 9-11; Hausfater and Hrdy, Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives, (Introduction and Overview) xv. Technically, Hausfater and Hrdy call murder immediately after birth “infanticide.” They want us to think of child murder as operating on a continuum of foeticide-infanticide-filicide/pedicide. They do acknowledge, however, that this usage is best suited for discussions of animal behavior where the avian or mammalian offspring are mostly independent entities shortly after birth. Scrimshaw and other evolutionary anthropologists (see the essays in Part IV of Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives) who study human populations have accepted, like Hoffer and Hull, that “infanticide” should cover the period of offspring’s complete dependence on the parent. In the case of humans, this definition necessarily extends the boundary of “infanticide” beyond the hours or days immediately after birth. Although there is little agreement about where the delineate “independence” (or, in the language of Hoffer and Hull, the “age of discretion”), the consensus is that in humans it lasts for years, not hours or days.
committed by the mother, sometimes aided by other relatives, such as her sister, mother, or – rarely – the infant’s father. Anthropological observers have noted that the decision to kill a neonate generally results from the infant’s deformity, a culture’s need to alter artificially the gender ratio, or the infant’s threat to the future reproductive success of the mother. The murder of children older than one day, on the other hand, may be committed by a relative (filicide) but is usually perpetrated by a genetically unrelated person (pedicide); it is frequently the result of systematic neglect or overt abuse. These patterns are confirmed by historical studies, including those that do not distinguish between neonaticide and filicide/pedicide such

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Randolf Roth (“Child Murder in New England,” “Homicide in Early Modern England”) has offered an elegant semantic solution to the problem of defining infanticide in humans. He calls murder of newly born infants “neonaticide,” freeing up the term “infanticide” to describe the murder of infants/children older than one day.

There is also modern medical and psychiatric evidence that suggests that neonaticide is an emphatically different phenomenon than the destruction of older infants and children, or adults. This body of medical evidence points to hormone levels immediately before, during, and after birth, as well as the mental effects of exhaustion and isolation. See Julie Wheelwright, “‘Nothing in between’: Modern Cases of Infanticide,” in Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550-2000, Mark Jackson ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 276-277.

16 Dickinson and Sharpe, 42-43.

17 Hausfater, 501-502.

18 Writing in 1975, before the anthropological studies began to influence the historical examination of infanticide, Keith Wrightson noted a distinction in methods of English infanticide that varied according to the age of the victim. Neonates were strangled or suffocated by the mother; older infants perished as a result of neglect during nursing, often by the design of the father. “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” 16. There is some concern that these historical studies are merely bearing out the cultural expectations for infanticide, as opposed to its actual incidence. That said, it is striking that this pattern – neonaticide as calculated murder committed by mother immediately after birth, filicide/pedicide as death of older offspring resulting from systematic neglect by a non-maternal caretaker – seems to be a behavior both universal among and peculiar to humans. See the Introduction and essays in Part IV of Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives (Hausfater and Hrdy, eds.), 427-520.
as Richard Trexler’s “Infanticide in Florence” and Hoffer and Hull’s *Murdering Mothers*.\(^{19}\)

One reason for this discussion of terms is that historians of England have largely eschewed using the more precise language that has developed in the broader study of child murder. Historians working in this field have preferred using the inexact term “infanticide” when their work has been almost exclusively limited to the exploration of neonaticide.\(^{20}\) The current essay deals with several types of child murder. For reasons that will be discussed below, neonaticide was probably the most commonly occurring form of child murder in early modern England. Popular pamphlets, however, did not necessarily confine their discussion of infanticide to the murder of newborns. This body of printed materials was more interested in demonizing deviant womanhood, and their rhetoric therefore did not require that the victims be very recently separated from their mother’s bodies. Because of the confusion of terms, I have tried to be as precise as possible in this essay, reserving the word “infanticide” when I mean it in its broadest sense. Sometimes I use it as a synonym for neonaticide or newborn child murder, but that is to avoid repetition only when the intended meaning is clear.

\(^{19}\) Trexler, 48.

The central concern of this essay is newborn child murder, as it dominated the English experience of infanticide. It was the primary legal understanding of infanticide at least since the passage of the 1624 “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children.” Moreover, it was likely the most common form of child murder due to the relative ease of committing it, especially if the pregnancy had been concealed. Because neonaticide was much harder to prove circumstantially in an era when it was not uncommon for women to miscarry late in pregnancy, to endure stillbirth, or to bear weak infants, there was much debate and concern about how to distinguish murder from death by natural causes.

Murdering older infants and children was a much more complex scenario than killing a newborn. The cause of abrupt, violent death for older infants and children was more obviously signaled on their bodies, as generally their greater size and strength required greater force to murder them. Neglect and malnourishment left observable indicators on the victim. Neighbors, servants or other children in the household, who could subsequently confirm the coroner’s conclusions, also witnessed systematic withholding of food, clothing, and other necessities from dependent children. Although neonaticide is the present focus, the line between neonaticide and infanticide is at times blurry (or non-existent), especially in popular print. It will be instructive to consider both the absence of this distinction, as well as the murder and execution of pregnant women. The lines drawn between the murder of a fetus, a neonate, and an older infant are as arbitrary as they are useful.  

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY

2.1 FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES

Historical interest in European infanticide grew out of several historiographic trends in the 1970s. Social science endeavors such as population reconstruction and the history of crime combined with contemporary enthusiasm for the history of childhood, the family, and sexuality to encourage the investigation of infanticide. The point of departure for early studies of the phenomenon was the assumption that among ordinary pre-modern people life was cheap: children were a burden tolerated only for their eventual economic contribution to the household, and the short life expectancy of those who made it to adulthood encouraged the emotional distance, and neglect, of dependents. Pre-modern family life approximated a Hobbesian state of nature for Lawrence Stone, whose *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* epitomizes this negative view of the relationship between parents and their children in English historiography. His questionable research and untenable conclusions about

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the typical peasant family were in part based on assumptions about the supposedly prevalent European practice of exposing, abandoning, or otherwise neglecting unwanted infants.

Many historians found that Stone’s accounts of family life among the English poor in *The Family, Sex and Marriage* lacked reliability.\(^\text{23}\) In particular, social historians studying demography and crime helped to correct some of these erroneous conclusions. The statistical data that they compiled from the careful study of parish and court records gave a more accurate picture of the lives of everyday people than the bourgeois voices in Stone’s literary sources. Social historians reconstructed families and communities from such records, demonstrating that in fact family life and childhood had not been as negative as portrayed by Stone.\(^\text{24}\) They have helped to create a more balanced picture of interpersonal relationships, from courtship and marriage to parenthood and other bonds within the community. More importantly for our current discussion, they have demonstrated that infanticide was rare.

Keith Wrightson was the first to conclude that the rate of newborn child murder was far too low in seventeenth century England for historians to interpret it either as a form of socially sanctioned population control or as evidence of pre-modern parents’ emotional distance from their young.\(^\text{25}\) Wrightson’s data, drawn from the parish register of Terling, Essex, suggests that only two percent of bastards

\(^{23}\) Two examples of landmark monographs that debunk Lawrence Stone’s argument are David Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and Death* and Linda Pollock’s *Forgotten Children*.


were the victims of infanticide. Effective management of premarital sexual
relationships meant that the illegitimacy rate hovered around 2-3 percent of births in
early modern England.\textsuperscript{26} Accordingly, Wrightson’s findings suggest an infanticide
rate of 40 per 100,000 births.\textsuperscript{27} If that figure is extrapolated to all of England, we
might estimate that fifty-five infanticides occurred throughout the kingdom in 1600.\textsuperscript{28}
From 1601 to 1665 in Essex, fourteen percent of parishes experienced prosecution for
infanticide.\textsuperscript{29} Newborn child murder was clearly not unknown, even though it was a
rare occurrence.

It is perhaps misleading to talk about “infanticide” indictments before 1624,
although all of the studies of infanticide, and most of the studies of crime, in England
do so. Before the 1624 Act carved out the “destroying and murthering of bastard
children” as a separate crime, murder was murder regardless of the age of the victim,
the marital status of the perpetrator, and the relationship between the victim and

\textsuperscript{26} Wrightson estimated the illegitimacy rate at 6.3 percent. The number has since been agreed upon for
the kingdom as a whole as approximately 2-3 percent. Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 73-74.
Nevertheless, there was significant variation in bastardy rates according to region, with southeast
England having the lowest illegitimacy rate, hovering around 1.5 percent for most of the seventeenth
century. See Adair, Courtship, Illegitimacy, and Marriage, 52-53 (table 2.2 and figure 2.3). Bastardy
rates also fluctuated across time, reaching a notable high at the 1590s and a curious nadir in the 1640s.
See Wrigley and Schofield for statistics and Peter Laslett, ed., Bastardy and Its Comparative History

\textsuperscript{27} Wrightson, “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” 18-19. (.02)(.02)=.0004
Wrightson admits that an infanticide rate of two percent of bastard births represents a high estimate,
but it is based on the actual infanticide indictment rate. There were, of course, infanticides that were
not indicted.

\textsuperscript{28} This estimate was calculated using Wrigley and Schofield’s birth totals for 1600 (138,567)
multiplied by the .0004 figure. The Population History of England, 496-502. If we assume that the
illegitimacy rate for England in 1600 was three percent (the higher accepted estimate), a two percent
infanticide rate would be 83 murders in 1600.

\textsuperscript{29} Wrightson, “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” 11-12. Nearly two percent of
Essex parishes experienced two infanticide prosecutions during the same period. Wrightson does not
note which seven parishes experienced two infanticide prosecutions. It would be interesting to know
where these parishes were located.
perpetrator. Nevertheless, historians have recognized that homicide and infanticide follow very different trends. They have also been interested in the impact of the 1624 Act; to measure its impact requires distinguishing infanticide from homicide even before infanticide was constructed as a distinct crime in the law.

One of the most prominent scholars of crime in early modern England has examined the trends for homicide and infanticide. James Sharpe, in his monumental study of crime in early modern England – in addition to confirming that infanticide was rare – verified the hypothesis that infanticide was an emphatically different action than homicide. Infanticide indictments steadily increased over the course of the seventeenth century, even as overall homicide indictments dramatically decreased.30 Unlike homicide rates, infanticide rates did not seem to be responding to the cultural and social shifts away from violence – usually described as part of the “reformation of manners” – that were broadly evident in England by the end of the seventeenth century.31 In the Palatinate of Chester during the first decade of the seventeenth century, there were 45 indictments for homicide. On the other hand, there were fewer than 5 indictments for infanticide.32 If we assume that the homicide rate was (approximately) 10 times higher than the infanticide rate throughout England in 1600, the total number of homicides would be about 550 in one year. Compare this with the estimated 55 infanticides in 1600 discussed above. Sharpe demonstrates that this ratio was not constant in the Chester Palatinate over the course of the seventeenth

31 Sharpe, ibid., 86-88.
32 Sharpe, ibid., 87, figure 3.
century. By 1700 the homicide and infanticide indictments had equalized. Homicides dropped steadily over the century, following Europe-wide trends toward less interpersonal violence; infanticides, however, increased over the same period.

Jim Sharpe is also notable for proposing the existence of an “infanticide wave” during the seventeenth century that outpaced the more widely studied “witch craze.” His conclusion rests on increasing indictments for infanticide, the passage of the 1624 statute that targeted infanticide for unusually severe punishment, and the exceptionally high execution rate for convicted infanticides that punctuated the seventeenth century. He directly compares the number of women executed for infanticide with the number executed for witchcraft: in Cheshire between 1580 and 1709, thirty-three women were hanged for infanticide, eleven were hanged for witchcraft; in Essex between 1620 and 1680, thirty-one women were hanged for infanticide, twenty for witchcraft.33

2.2 HISTORICAL CONSENSUS OF TYPICAL INFANTICIDE SCENARIO

Most recently, historians have been working to reconstruct the typical infanticide scenario in early modern England. They have examined indictments and other court records in order to determine the motives, methods, and consequences of newborn child murder. The resulting consensus established by James Sharpe, R. Malcolmson, Laura Gowing, and J.R. Dickinson confirms that most infanticides took place at birth. The murderer was nearly always the neonate’s mother: usually an

33 Sharpe, 87-88, 158. Sharpe (79) explicitly states his view that “the ‘European witch craze’ is a somewhat hyperbolic concept.” See also Sharpe and Dickinson, “Infanticide in Early Modern England,” 36.
unmarried domestic servant in her early twenties. The murder itself took place in the course of a secret, solitary birth, which followed a concealed pregnancy. The mother disposed of the body as she was able in a privy, a ditch, a pond, a shallow grave, or – because servant girls could find it difficult to get away from their domestic duties long enough to dispose of the corpse – hidden in a box, or even in her bed. The deed was exposed by the discovery of the infant’s corpse or the mother’s confession, usually upon interrogation regarding bloody clothes, an unexpected absence from work followed by unusual weakness, or a suddenly flattened belly. Sometimes members of the woman’s household or community had suspected that she was pregnant, evidenced by their questions of and accusations toward her before the birth and by their ability, at times, to determine quickly whom to interrogate about suspicious circumstances. Other times, however, weeks would pass between birth and discovery of the body, with no indication of who the mother might have been.

In short, one plot dominates judicial narratives of infanticide in early modern England: illegitimate conception, public denial of pregnancy, secret birth, a swift death, hasty disposal of the body, and an attempt by the mother to return to her life and work as though the event had not happened. The motivation presumed by the public – often echoed by the mothers themselves – was that the course of action

34 Unlike Trexler’s findings concerning infanticide in Florence, as well as patterns of infanticide documented in other cultures, in early modern England the sex of the child appears to have been irrelevant. Dickinson and Sharpe, 49.

35 Aside from some early exploratory work on the topic in the 1970s, there is a well-established consensus among historians about the typical infanticide scenario. A concise summary of existing scholarship was provided in 1982 by Wrightson, “Infanticide in European History,” 5-8. More recent confirmation has been provided by Sharpe, 158; Wrightson, “Europe,” 6-7; Dickinson and Sharpe, “Infanticide in Early Modern England,” 41-48; and Malcolmson, “Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century.” The issue is explored at length in Gowing, “Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England.” All historians are relying on court records to reconstruct the course of events.
culminating in infanticide was followed in order to hide the mother’s shame. Fathers are nearly always absent from the general narrative.  

Fathers and other men related to accused women were not, however, absent from suspicion. They were indicted, although rarely. In the surviving records of the Home Circuit Assizes, 1559-1625, only 9 of 193 infanticide indictments were for men. Just two of these indictments specify that the indicted male was the father of the murdered child. In Bromley, Kent, in 1669 John Hunt was indicted for strangling his daughter at birth. This married yeoman was indicted as the principal (with no accomplices) in his crime. He was found not guilty; unfortunately no other details of the crime were given. The other father, William Ellyott, represents a much more complex and disturbing case. A clerk, he and his wife were indicted for killing their newborn son and burying him in the orchard at the vicarage in May 1565. Initially a jury found the couple not guilty after Christine Grantham was blamed. A year later William and Sybil Ellyott and Christine Grantham were all three indicted for strangling the baby boy: Christine as the principal, the mother and father as accessories. The jury returned a guilty verdict for all parties. Although convicted, William Ellyott was allowed benefit of clergy, which spared him execution.

36 Malcolmson, 202-203. Malcolmson suggests that they were likely men in positions of authority, such as masters or master’s sons, or other sexually unavailable males in the household. It is also possible, given the emphasis placed on the woman’s shame and the fact that the vast majority of illegitimate infants were not killed, that some of the murdered neonates were the products of incestuous relationships.


38 Cockburn (ed.), Calendar of Assize Records: Elizabeth I, Sussex Indictments, entries 151 and 203. This case is interesting in that the beneficiary of a “clergy” plea was actually a clerk. The majority of men pleading benefit of clergy were simply literate — or had managed to earn the compassion of the judge. On the widespread use of benefit of clergy by justices to prevent convicted male criminals from hanging in the gallows, see Cockburn, “Trial by the Book?” 76-77.
records are silent on what became of the two women after the trial. What community tragedy lies behind the two trials of their priest, accused of strangling his son and burying him in the vicarage orchard in an era rife with religious turmoil?\(^{39}\)

Although certainly we should expect that more of the men appearing in the assize courts were fathers of the children they were suspected of murdering, it is not obvious from the indictments what relationship exists between two (or more) parties. A rare example of desired clarity comes from the Kent Assize Court held in July 1652. Alice Prescott was indicted for strangling her newborn male child five years earlier; although he was not formally accused, the indictment specifies that Alice’s husband, Edward Prescott (a baker), “was present and abetted her in the felony.” The jury returned a verdict of ignoramus.\(^{40}\) A curious indictment against both Agnes and Thomas Crowcher, yeoman, accuses Thomas of murdering Agnes’s newborn daughter by throwing the infant violently to the ground. This ambiguous record could represent a married couple, but it is probably more likely that Thomas Crowcher was the father or brother of Agnes, described as a single woman.\(^{41}\)

It has been noted that the “typical” scenario of the young unmarried domestic servant who concealed her pregnancy and murdered her child at birth cannot possibly represent all infanticides during this period. The most important critique is that the

\(^{39}\) William Ellyott was not alone. Edmund Curteys, the vicar of Cuckfield (1571-81), was another Elizabethan clerk embroiled in an infanticide controversy. The suspected infanticide was his former maidservant, Mercy Gould, aided and abetted by Mrs. Curteys. Records indicate that this controversy split the town into two factions; ultimately Edmund Curteys lost his position and died a pauper. Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions*, 51-72.

\(^{40}\) Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Interregnum*, entry 673.

\(^{41}\) Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: James I*, *Kent Indictments*, entry 248.
stories that have been preserved for posterity are those that appear in judicial records, so the “typical” infanticide represented in the public record is skewed toward the stories of those who were most likely to get caught. As a result, widow infanticides are probably underrepresented in the judicial evidence because they enjoyed a level of domestic privacy and independence that young domestic servants, who lived in their masters’ household, did not.

There has been some speculation that married women or couples also murdered their newborn children at a higher rate than appear in the judicial records because, once again, the advantage of domestic privacy shielded them from public scrutiny.42 In the same sample from the Home Circuit Assizes described above, 21 of 193 infanticide indictments were for married women. (An additional 7 were for widowed women.) Severe underreporting of neonaticide among married women should be viewed with skepticism, however. From conception, the murder of unwanted or unsupportable legitimate infants most likely followed a different plot. Unlike single domestic servants, married women were not in danger of losing employment, and there was no shame in marital pregnancy. Therefore, there was no need to conceal the married woman’s condition. Secondly, childbirth for married Englishwomen during the early modern period was a semi-public female event, attended by many village matrons and at least one midwife.43 This group of women was unlikely to have condoned the destruction of a live, healthy infant. Moreover, married women and couples need not have risked neonaticide when filicide was a

42 Dickinson and Sharpe, “Infanticide in Early Modern England,” 42.

43 Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, chapters 2-3.
safer option. The privacy of the household gave ample opportunity for purposeful neglect of an infant to result in an “accident,” such as overlaying or being scalded when boiling liquid was dropped in the cradle. A married mother could also bring about filicide by under-nourishing the infant, or sending the infant to a wetnurse reputed to solve families’ problem of unwanted children.  

Despite flaws in the judicial records due to systematic omissions – the underreporting of infanticide by married women, the relative absence of male infanticides, and our general inability to estimate with certainty the number of infanticides that were never discovered (the “dark figure”) – patterns that emerge in infanticide indictments likely provide the historian with a reasonable approximation of the typical pattern of the crime. Single women appear most frequently as infanticides not because of an English propensity to view them as social deviants, but because they were the women who had the most to lose as the result of an extra-marital pregnancy. Their reputations, employment, and marriageability – all of which were key factors in their long-term ability to support themselves – were put at serious

44 Wrightson, “Infanticide in European History,” 4-5. Trexler, 45-52. Malcolmson, 206-7. Kellum, “Infanticide in England in the Later Middle Ages,” 368-372. Kellum understands most recorded accidents that killed infants in late medieval England to have been culturally condoned disposal of unwanted infants. This is a highly disputed position to take (Barbara Hanawalt, for example, concludes exactly the opposite), and it is not one that I find persuasive. Nevertheless, the sermons and other prescriptive material that Kellum examines do suggest that there was widespread suspicion that a portion of infant deaths was not really accidental. The same tropes identified by Kellum for the middle ages seem to extend into the early modern period, however by the eighteenth century the traditional methods were being replaced by “baby farms.” Wrightson describes their activities: “at best [they] provided poor nourishment and at worst tacitly guaranteed a child’s early death.” (“Infanticide in European History,” 12.) See also Wrightson, “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” 16-17.

risk when a pregnancy was discovered. Domestic servants appear most frequently as infanticides because they were young women at the margins of society who were the most likely to be deserted by their lovers after promises of marriage lured them into a sexual relationship. Their lovers were often men who were unable to marry them due to their inability to support an independent household (as in the case of fellow servants and farm laborers), an existing marriage (as was usually the case with masters), and familial or social sanctions (which prevented marriage to masters’ sons and to male relatives of a prohibited degree). Sudden economic downturn – such as the successive failed harvests of the 1590s – also meant a higher number of advanced courtships were terminated before marriage, but after the initiation of a sexual relationship.

Conversely, men were usually absent from the infanticide indictment because they were not present at the birth, the time when the overwhelming majority of infanticides took place. Bringing babies into the world simply was not an activity with which men (other than the occasional male midwife) were involved in early modern England. Laura Gowing describes one man’s reaction to the obvious situation of his fellow servant giving birth: “Thomas reported hearing and seeing Ann in labour, but he intervened neither then nor later; instead, he left the parlour where she was ‘sick and crying of pain’, which he took to be ‘in travail and pains of childbirth’, and looked through the window…” Thomas Suckett was not the father of Ann Wright’s child, but he also harbored no ill will toward her according to the records left from the investigation. He left the room so that Ann could labor alone,

46 Sharpe, Crime in Early Modern England, 158.
watching for signs of a live infant from a culturally safer position outside the parlor window. Daniel Parsons observed a woman who claimed to be tending to her needs in the hedge at the edge of his barley field. He reprimanded her for choosing an improper place to do such business, and followed her out of the field. Her strange behavior and a large quantity of blood caused him to suspect childbirth, whereupon Mr. Parsons fetched his wife. He did not feel able to assess the extraordinary situation: he did not know what he was looking for other than something to explain Mary Thomas’s strange behavior. Even when circumstance placed men in the same time and place as birth, they avoided getting involved with the woman’s labor.

Although usually absent at the time of birth, fathers of murdered babies were a part of the story of their lover’s pregnancies. We can assume that, if the father of the child was a regular part of the young woman’s life, she shared the news of the pregnancy with him. A promise of marriage usually preceded the initiation of a sexual relationship, so the mother would have taken at least the initial steps to secure the fulfillment of his promise. In situations where the mother was unable to expect marriage – such as when her married master or her close male relative was the father of her child – many infanticide narratives nevertheless include references to the father’s desire that his identity never be revealed. In May 1666, Ann Porter recounted


48 Dickinson and Sharpe, “Infanticide in Court,” 44. (PRO CHES 24/164/3)

49 Cressy, Birth, Marriage and Death, 277-281. Adair, 146-148, also discusses this topic, but downplays the direct correlation between a promise and the initiation of a sexual relationship. Amussen, An Ordered Society, 132, counters, “it is unlikely that women – who faced loss of employment and reputation, who were driven from home by gossip and hostility, or even by fines against their parents – had ever deliberately sought pregnancy while unmarried.”
to the courts a typical interrogation of a confirmed infanticide, Isabel Nicholson, in order to find out the name of the infant’s father. After much denial when questioned by her mistress and Ann Porter, Isabel Nicholson finally admitted that she had borne a child and hid it in a bog: “And being desired by them [her mistress and fellow servant] to declare who was the father, she replied that she had sworn never to confess it.”

One way in which the mother’s lover does surface as complicit in the crime of newborn child murder, however, is in the attempt to terminate the pregnancy in its earlier stages. It was often the father of the child who sought out potent herbs, savin, ratsbane, mercury, or steel filings to help restore his lover’s monthly flow, a euphemistic way of speaking about the termination of pregnancy. The most notorious example from seventeenth-century England, Richard Skeete of Colchester, has been described as “the Essex Abortionist.” He attempted to terminate the five pregnancies of his lover, Lydia Downes. His “use of her body” was responsible for at least three of her pregnancies; when his administration of abortifacients and charms failed to restore menstruation he murdered his offspring upon their births. (A rebel, Richard Skeete’s presence at Lydia’s deliveries was highly unconventional.)

Although Francis Lane did not actually intend to procure an abortion for his lover, Rose Arnold, his claim to do so and her eager compliance with his instructions suggest that fathers were not infrequently complicit in the crime of hiding or ending a

50 Gowing, 113. Information of Ann Porter, Hawkesdale, Cumb., 13 May 1666 (PRO, ASSI 45 8/1/81).

51 See Gowing, 97-98.

pregnancy. Rose was a servant in the house of Mr. Lane, when his son, Francis, seduced her with promises of marriage. Upon learning that she was pregnant, Francis tried to push her down the well. She had dutifully bent over it to draw some water after he informed her that he had “read in a book that if a woman in such a case will but immediately drink a draught of well water it would cure her of such a disease.” The trick did not work – Rose fought back when Francis shoved her – but had her pregnant body drowned in the well, it might have appeared a suicide or accident. Either way, the double murder would certainly have spared Francis Lane a marriage and child that he did not desire.53

More typical of male involvement in the process of ending a desperately unwanted pregnancy is the story of Lydia Downe’s first attempt to seek a “cure.” The young woman was living with her sister and brother-in-law when she discovered she was pregnant by a certain Tunbridge. It was her brother-in-law, concerned about her “condition,” who originally sought a cure from a woman in Chelmsford. (In the process of procuring the necessary poison from Chelmsford, Richard Skeete fatefully convinced Lydia’s brother-in-law that his charms and potions would be the better cure for Lydia’s first pregnancy. As a result of Skeete’s efforts, she supposedly miscarried Tunbridge’s child.)54

Clearly men – fathers, brothers, husbands, and lovers – are not absent from narratives of actual infanticides contained in court records. Yet because of their distance from childbirth men were nevertheless generally absent at the time of the


infant’s death, sparing them immediate suspicion. Given that infanticide was not practiced in England as a means of limiting fertility, we may assume that if at any point during the pregnancy the fathers of murdered babies had indicated a willingness or ability to support their offspring, most mothers would not have concluded that infanticide was worth the incredible costs. Any woman considering murder as a solution to her problem would certainly have weighed the mental toll of constantly denying an increasingly obvious physical state, the risks of an unassisted birth, the psychological price of extinguishing a life that had just been separated from the her body, and the fears that in the end the infant’s murder might be discovered. The high cost of infanticide was reflected in its rarity.

Despite the crime’s very low incidence, the infanticide indictment rate followed a clear pattern in early modern England. Randy Roth’s synthesis of statistical studies demonstrates that a short-term surge in infanticide indictments during the 1580s was followed by a gradual increase in indictments over the course of the seventeenth century, which peaked in the decades between 1650 and 1690. During the second half of the seventeenth century, surviving indictments suggest an infanticide rate as high as 30 to 40 per 100,000 births. Starting at the close of the seventeenth century infanticide indictments plummeted, then continued to drop steadily, so that by 1800 the infanticide rate was well under 10 per 100,000 births. When charted against the birth rate, age at first marriage, and real wages, Roth’s results are compelling and informative. His graphs show an unmistakable pattern: as real wages dropped, the average age of first marriage for women rose and the

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55 Roth, “Homicide in Early Modern England,” 43-44.
proportion of women never married soared. As might be expected, the overall fertility of the population decreased. The rate of infanticide indictments marched in tandem with these other population indicators, rising as the seventeenth century demographic crisis worsened. The indictment rate, although still very low compared to other European societies, was highest when the number of women in the danger zone – unmarried and desperate to survive – was highest.\textsuperscript{56} Roth’s synthesis suggests that the mother’s sense of hopelessness and inability to provide for a child drove her to the last resort of murdering her newborn infant.

Most women changed their reproductive strategy in response to persistently low real wages. As it became more difficult to feed additional mouths, women delayed marriage in order to restrict their fertility.\textsuperscript{57} This strategy worked so long as sexual relationships between men and women were confined to serious courtship and marriage. But in an era when the age of first marriage was 27 or 28 for men and 25 or 26 for women,\textsuperscript{58} the viability of delaying sexual relationships until the formation of an economically viable household decreased. Modern observers are impressed that this strategy worked as well as it did. Nevertheless, some young women on the margins of society found themselves pregnant, unmarried, and lacking an obvious means for supporting their infants. Thus, the indictment rate for infanticide increased

\textsuperscript{56} Roth, “Homicide in Early Modern England,” 35-44. See especially the charts on pp. 39-41.

\textsuperscript{57} Adair, 132 (citing Laslett).

\textsuperscript{58} Cressy, Birth, Marriage and Death, 285. Roth, “Homicide in Early Modern England,” figure 6 shows a peak in the mean age of women (at first marriage) at 26-27. This peak occurs in the second half of the seventeenth century. Wrigley and Schofield, table 7.26 (p.255), also shows the mean age of women at first marriage at 26.0 (1600-1649) and 26.5 (1650-1699).
slightly (as a proportion of all births) as opportunities for appropriate sexual behavior tightened severely during the seventeenth century crisis.

Historians of law, crime, and gender have marshaled evidence of when infanticide happened and proposed why it happened. The ambiguity and secrecy surrounding the act, along with its taboo status in English society, restrict what modern historians can claim to know about infanticide. Nevertheless, it is possible to grapple with perhaps the most important aspect of this rare crime: how people made meaning of it. The remainder of this essay will consider how English society reacted to infanticide. What meanings did local communities make out of suspicious infant deaths? How did the broader cultural discourse treat infanticide? Why?
CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVES OF INFANTICIDE

3.1 IMPOSING ORDER ON AMBIGUITY

Upon discovery of evidence of infanticide or a secret birth, members of the household and local community had the first opportunity to construct a narrative of what had happened. Mothers or mistresses maintained authority over their female dependent’s body; they determined when a young woman’s breasts required examination, sometimes shielding her from the scrutiny of neighbors. Mothers or mistresses also controlled the how much access the parish had to the evidence of a concealed pregnancy and birth. If they were complicit in the perpetration of infanticide, it could be hard for the community to investigate without the undeniable evidence of a corpse to confirm suspicions.

When mature women of the household did not prevent the inquiries of the community, the local midwife and a cadre of neighboring matrons controlled began investigations into the reproductive status of the presumed mother. These women were experienced in interpreting the physical signs of pregnancy and childbirth. They

59 Gowing, 91. Gowing demonstrates that in seventeenth century England the most common way to determine whether a young woman was pregnant or newly delivered was for village matrons to feel her breasts. Often the suspected single woman’s breast was simply grabbed, without permission or warning, as though her reproductive body were the property of the community.
were also accustomed to a culture that treated bastard childbirth as the ideal time to exploit the mother’s vulnerable emotional state to force her to confess the name of the father. In the case of suspected infanticide, they instead attempted to get a confession and find out where the woman hid the corpse and other evidence, such as the afterbirth and soiled clothes or linens. In the converse scenario – when they had a corpse, but the mother remained at large – they needed to procure evidence that the suspected woman was in fact the mother. Either way, the midwife maintained much control over how the evidence gathered was interpreted. Her assessment of the infant’s size and formation determined whether it was a miscarriage; her evaluation of the circumstances of labor could produce the interpretation of a stillbirth. Both miscarriage and stillbirth were legitimate explanations for the birth/death event, which did not implicate anyone with having committed a moral or legal transgression.

Even when they determined that someone had purposefully extinguished the life of the infant – a capital crime – the members of the community could choose, and sometimes did choose, to adopt officially a stance of ignorance or complicity. They retained complete control over whether to report the crime to the coroner; therefore, the initial construction of the infant’s death as murder or as resulting from natural causes was entirely within the power of the local community. Historians of child murder have recently begun examining materials gathered during pre-trial infanticide investigations in order to come closer to understanding how local communities interpreted the ambiguities attending the discovery of a neonate’s corpse.  

Even after this aspect of infanticide as been thoroughly investigated, however, we will only

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be able to guess at how many narratives contributed to the “dark figure,” that statistic which (if known) would represent the number of willfully murdered infants whose killers were not turned over to law enforcement officials.\textsuperscript{61}

When the case was reported to the authorities, the suspect was subject to the king’s law. The 1624 “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children” reflected concerns that many infanticidal mothers escaped capital punishment by relating entirely plausible claims of miscarriage or stillbirth. Parliament therefore made it felonious to be the unwed mother of a dead infant if the pregnancy had been concealed. They attempted to eliminate ambiguity by redefining infanticide by its context (secrecy, lack of public announcement) rather than the action (murder). The only means of avoiding conviction was to produce a reliable witness that the infant had been born dead. This law jeopardized young servant girls in particular. They were more likely to hide pregnancy for as long as possible in order to remain employed. Likewise their employment, usually spent on their feet, increased the likelihood that their pregnancies would end early in miscarriage or stillbirth.\textsuperscript{62} Ignorance about the course of pregnancy and a desire to keep her job meant that labor might overcome the young woman when she was alone – in a field, privy, or home – without a ready witness.\textsuperscript{63}

Parliament defined infanticide as broadly as possible in order to eliminate the possibility that ambiguous evidence would prevent the conviction of “lewd mothers”

\textsuperscript{61} Hoffer and Hull. 5.

\textsuperscript{62} Steckel, 428-429.

\textsuperscript{63} For extended discussion of the locations where young servants claimed to have unexpectedly gone into labor, see Gowing, “Secret Births and Infanticide,” 98-108; Dickinson and Sharpe, “Infanticide in Early Modern England,” 42-46.
who murdered their bastard children. The judges and juries left to enforce the law, however, still had several legal loopholes available to save an accused woman from the gallows. Unconvinced juries could return a verdict of ignoramus. They could blame it on an unknown malefactor, hence the recurring names “John Death,” “John Anoke,” and others among the indictments for the Assize Courts.64

Most frequently, judges exploited the legal loophole provided by “pleading the belly” as a mechanism for allowing convicted female prisoners to go free when judges thought that execution was too harsh a punishment for the crime committed. In a belly plea, a convict claimed to be pregnant past the point of “quickening.” According to English law, if a jury of matrons declared a female convict was quick with child, she could not be hanged. In theory, pleading the belly prevented a pregnant woman from going to the gallows only until she had borne the child. In reality, belly pleas were regularly successful even when the woman was obviously neither quick with child nor even in the early stages of pregnancy. Regardless of whether the woman ever bore a child subsequent to pleading the belly, she was usually allowed to die a natural death, free from fear of the rope. The rate at which women convicted of infanticide escaped the rope due to belly pleas suggests that judges and juries of matrons were not infrequently sympathetic to the desperation of their plight, despite the damning evidence that lead to a guilty verdict.65 When judges and juries overrode the letter of the law, it implies that at times they chose to

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64 These names were for generic malefactors; they appear connected with other crimes as well. Knafla, “John at Love killed her,” 314.

65 Cockburn, Calendar of Assize Records: Home Circuit Indictments, Elizabeth I and James I: Introduction, 121-123.
construct infanticide differently than the members of Parliament who devised the laws. Unfortunately, there are no surviving sources detailing why judges overturned the expectations of the legal system in so many of these cases. Lacking explicit entries in diaries of assize and quarter session justices and detailed notes from clerks, historians can only speculate how judges and juries constructed infanticide. Nevertheless, their routine deviation from legal expectation strongly suggests their reluctance to adhere to the official construction of infanticide as embodied in statute law.

The ambivalence of communities, judges, and juries was likely the result of real people dealing with real problems. They lived with (or perhaps even grew up with) the suspect, her family, or her employer. They might have sympathized with her situation. Some in a position to construct meaning around the birth/death event probably believed strongly that all humans are fallible and were therefore reluctant to condemn an otherwise good and honest woman to death without positive evidence of ill-intent. Perhaps it was easiest to rationalize the act as an accident, especially when an alternate outcome would have meant another bastard supported by the parish.

There are many aspects of the woman’s situation and her community’s condition that we simply will never know. Was she undernourished? Was the local community already unable to support the needs of orphans and the poor? Was her child’s father a soldier that she knew she would never see again? Was the community making an example of bastard-bearers by sending her to the workhouse? Did everyone know that her master’s son exploited her willingness to believe his promises of marriage? Much information that the historian desires to know does not survive in the court
records. Enough does survive, however, to confirm that communities had as difficult a time making sense of the event as the unmarried mother did her pregnancy.66

3.2 INFANTICIDE IN POPULAR PRINT

“Not like a mother, but a monster...”67

It is common to note the explosion of printed matter during the mid-seventeenth century, and most of that explosion was made up of political polemic and newspapers. While both of these are important sources in the study of culture in early modern England, there existed popular genres that predated the explosion of print that were just as polemical and, well, trashy. One of these genres was the murder pamphlet.68 The equivalent of early modern tabloids, they detailed the untrue and the partly true. They always covered the sensational and salacious. Short or long, they were always colorful.

Some of these murder pamphlets covered infanticide; in my research for this essay I tried to read as many of these narratives as I could, since (as Peter Lake amply demonstrates) these murder pamphlets are an exercise in representation. Peter Lake was concerned with the representation of religion; here, I am concerned with the representation of mothers and infants. For this project, I read 24 narratives that would fall into the category of “murder pamphlet.” I read a large number of additional narratives that are better categorized as “gaol proceedings.” Unlike murder

66 Gowing suggests that unmarried women who concealed their pregnancies were unlikely to understand – or tried to ignore – how their bodies were changing and preferred to interpret the signs as gas or another common ailment, 101-103, 107-108.

67 Deeds against Nature and Monsters by Kinde (1614).

68 See Peter Lake’s tome, The Anti-Christ’s Lewd Hat, for an exhaustive study of this genre.
pamphlets, this second genre tends toward a journalistic style that attempts to report real facts. It editorializes, but minimally. This printed form crystallized in the final quarter of the seventeenth century, growing out of the popularity of news and the insatiable public interest in crime. The following discussion is pulled entirely from the murder pamphlet genre. Gaol proceedings echoed the sentiments of authors composing the damning narratives in the murder pamphlet genre, but they pale in comparison. They also became common as the more salacious murder pamphlet was falling out of public favor.

The constructions of child murder promoted in the murder pamphlets were far less ambivalent than those created by families, friends, communities and the justice system. The authors writing for a mass market overwhelmingly presented narratives of wicked murders. They by-passed suspicious deaths (although they contain plenty of details of suspicious neighbors) and launched immediately into representations of infanticide as grossly deviant womanhood. As pamphleteers expounded this construction for public consumption, their pamphlets exposed otherwise unstated cultural expectations for motherhood, infancy, and family life. Moreover, once infanticide was equated with grossly deviant womanhood, it was employed as an epithet to characterize others as deviant. The murder of infants became shorthand for describing a woman who, overcome by Satan, was transformed into her lewd counterpart. The mirror opposite of virtuous womanhood, she destroyed that which she was bound by God and nature to protect with her life: her own child.

Armed with this damning construction of infanticide, authors employed it for numerous ends. It became an epithet that effectively demonized certain social
groups, such as religious sects, which the hegemonic culture had an interest in portraying as wicked outsiders. It was used to reinforce cultural expectations for the management of sexuality and pregnancy. And as can be expected in a society highly sensitive to the evil potential of Satan to lead good Christians astray, infanticide narratives almost always contained strong warnings about the dangers of temptation.

Although not designed for the popular press, the language of the 1624 “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children” is a good starting point for our discussion of interpretations of infanticide in print. It provided a model discourse for infanticide, as it was published and proclaimed from time to time as local authorities sought to decrease the number of suspicious infant deaths.\(^69\)

Moreover, in the depositions studied by Laura Gowing and the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey* (regularly published accounts of proceedings at London’s central court beginning in 1674), everyday people seemed to understand how infanticide was legally constructed. They certainly understood the implications of the law, which we have seen manifested in their attempts to negotiate and circumscribe it.\(^70\)

The 1624 Act was unequivocal in its broad construction of infanticide as gross, female deviance. It assumed that only single women, already guilty of sexual misconduct, would be so “lewd” as to compound their transgressions with murder.

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\(^{69}\) For example, in 1680 the City of London ordered the printing and publication of broadsides that reproduced the 1624 legislation. Appended to the act is this note “His Majesties Justices here present, taking notice of the frequency of Murthering of Bastard Children, by their Lewd Mothers; for the better preventing thereof, do think fit, agree and order, that the Statue above mentioned be Printed at the charge of this City, and be sent to the Ministers of the sevrral Parish Churches within this City and the Liberties thereof; who are desired to cause the same to be openly Read in their Churches, four times in a Year, after Morning-Prayer, for the purpose aforesaid.”

\(^{70}\) *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* are available online at “Old Bailey Online,” http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/
Parliament also assigned a motivation to these “lewd mothers” of bastards: they engaged in such “great Mischeife” to “avoyd their shame and to escape punishment.” The legislation outlined the elements of her lewdness: the concealed pregnancy; the shameful, secret birth of a bastard; the concealed death; and the secret burial. All of these elements were direct affronts to English society. Murder, in the case that the mother did intentionally kill her infant, was ranked among the most odious crimes. It was one of the few crimes for which punishment to the fullest extent of the law – hanging – was regularly exercised.\(^7\)

In the event that the mother concealed her pregnancy but did not murder her child, her behavior was nonetheless opprobrious. Pregnancy was a public matter, especially when the woman was unmarried.\(^7\) Most bastards, born to poor women, were the responsibility of the parish, therefore the reproduction of single women was necessarily a community issue. Even legitimate pregnancies were of interest to everyone because they brought forth new individuals whose labor would (in theory) help to sustain the community’s economy and church. Childbirth was a highly orchestrated community ritual that signaled the arrival of this new, much valued life. Like their married counterparts, mothers of illegitimate children had a midwife and company of matrons attending the birth, ensuring the life of the mother, celebrating the arrival of a healthy infant, and (most importantly) extracting the name of the father while the vulnerable woman was laboring. Death and burial were also highly ritualized moments in the life cycle that required the support of the community.

\(^{71}\) Sharpe, “Enforcing the Law,” 97-119.

\(^{72}\) Gowing implies this in her discussion of single women’s pregnant bodies, which were open to public scrutiny and handling, 90-98.
Concealment of pregnancy, birth, and death denied the parish participation in the most pivotal events of community life. These moments were communal by definition in seventeenth century England, and to make them secret also made them lewd, “whether [the infant] were borne alive or not.”

Popular reading matter also overwhelmingly defined infanticide as a crime perpetrated by lewd mothers. The female miscreants were variously described as “bloody,” “cruel,” “barbarous,” “horrid,” and “unnatural.” A recurring theme is that these women did not deserve the appellation “mother” or even “woman.” Almost all authors at some point exploit the syllabic similarity of the words mother, murder (usually spelled “murther” in the seventeenth century), and monster. Often animal imagery is used to call up images of vicious beasts or repulsive creatures. In these descriptions, the actions of the female infanticides were explicitly contrasted with the normative behavioral expectations for mothers. Such imagery is referenced throughout the narratives, but two of the most colorful examples will be examined in detail here.

Martha Scambler’s story fit the typical infanticide scenario. A single woman, she concealed her pregnancy, gave birth in secret, strangled the infant, and threw it into the privy. In the months before the birth, Martha “by a devilish practise sought to consume it [the fetus] in her body” (a reference to her attempt to induce abortion). Such behavior earned her the following appellations: “Caterpiller of nature, a creature

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73 See Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, which argues that these three lifecycle events were defined as pivotal moments in English culture. All language in quotation marks is taken directly from 21 Jac I c.27. See Appendix A to this essay (p.61) for the complete statute.
more savage than a shee woolfe, more unnaturall then either bird or beast.” The author explains why she deserves such condemnation,

“For every creature hath a tender feeling of love to their young, except some few murtherous-minded strumpets, woemen I cannot call them, for a woman esteemes the fruit of her owne womb, the pretious and dearest Jewell of the world, and for the cherishing of the same will (as it were) spend her lives purest blood, where, contrariwise the harlot (delighting in shame and sinne) makes no conscience to be the butcher of her owne seed, nay the Image of God created in her owne body…”

Martha was not worthy to be called a woman because she did not value her principal asset within English society. Her womb set her apart from men; she was endowed with the gift of sustaining the life that was created by God. Instead of treasuring the beautiful life that she had nurtured in her womb, she destroyed it. As a result, she met her end on the scaffold, so that God’s judgment upon her might be hastened.

The relationship between mother and child was frequently couched in religious discourse. Infants were created in God’s image, an interpretation of Genesis 1:27 that was harnessed to support their preservation. The pelican as a religious symbol also appears in these infanticide narratives, representing the sacred bond between mother and child. Margret Vincent’s children deserved a “Mother who by nature should have cherisht them with her owne body, as the Pellican that pecks her owne brest to feed her young ones with her blood.” Her victims, however, were borne of woman “more curell then the Viper, the invenomd Serpent, the Snake, or any Beast whatsoever, against all kind, takes away those lives to whom she first gave life.”

Christians had exploited the image of the Pelican for centuries to describe

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74 *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by Kinde* (1614).
75 *A pittiless Mother* (1616).
Christ’s sacrifice for his Church. Here, that religious iconography is redeployed to describe the self-sacrifice required of the mother whose very lifeblood should be spilled to support her offspring. A mother literally sheds blood in the course of childbirth – the very moment of bringing her child to life. She is also expected to support her infant with her blood metaphorically, although it may weaken her. The ideal mother should have the same relationship with her children as Christ does with the Church. This image of mother-as-Pelican contrasts sharply with the imagery used to describe the infanticidal woman. The latter is represented by vicious animal imagery that recalls Satan and his minions. The unnatural, diabolical actions of such women was directly associated with the influence of the Devil.

Many infanticide pamphlets feature unmarried women as the protagonist, which opens their sexual activity to authors’ commentary. Their sexuality is generally assaulted by such insults as “strumpet,” “whore,” and references to their “lewdness.” Martha Scambler was described as a “lascivious, lewd and close strumpet,” a “harlot…of unwomanly carriage,” and a “graceless wanton.” The shamefulness of bearing illegitimate children is another prevalent theme in these stories. In an (allegedly) first-person narrative of her infanticide, Dorothy Livingstone described the birth of her illegitimate child as the delivery of “the burthen of my sin and shame.” Jane Hattersley’s pregnancies were characterized as “loads of woe and shame” and the “fruit of lust, and unlawfull pleasures.” Her “polluted womb” had carried several such “unhappy loads.” Four children were sired

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76 Deeds against Nature and Monsters by Kinde (1614).

77 Gods Mercy and justice Displayed, in the Wicked Life and Penitential Death of Dorothy Lillingstone (1679), 4.
by her master, Adam Adamsonne, whom she had seduced with her “affibilitie and easie yeelding… as if she had spent an apparentiship in a house of such trading.” The author suggests that she was a prostitute before engaging in an unlawful relationship with her married master. Jane’s crimes were especially heinous because she was a repeat offender. She wantonly engaged in an illicit relationship and afterwards destroyed its shameful fruits.

The Devil was usually cited as the source of the unmarried infanticide’s misdeeds. He was an important enough character to have been featured in an illustration on the front of *A pittiless Mother*, where he hands Margret Vincent the cord with which she murders her children. Faced with the shame of an illegitimate child, Martha Scambler “by the persuasions of the Divill, put her in mind violently to make it away.” The Devil started with small excursions from righteous living until eventually he had worked himself thoroughly into the woman’s soul, causing her to abandon her natural duty to her infant. Dorothy Livingstone systematically described her descent to the depths of maternal depravity in her (supposed) first-person narrative. Disobedience to her parents started her on the path toward infanticide. Then she abandoned religion, “forsaking my Duties to God, both in private and publick prayer, reading, and hearing, with other duties of his worship.” This opened the door to further iniquities: “I made my self a prostitute to those lusts I had before that time only approved of;” and then “I lived in the constant commitment of


79 *Deeds against Nature and Monsters by Kinde* (1614).
whoredom with my Master, who was at that time a married man."\textsuperscript{80} Dorothy described how her distance from God enabled her to commit such a heinous crime:

"but the temptations of the devil overpower’d all good resolutions in me, and when the hour of bringing forth approached, leaving the principles of Christianity, and laying aside the bowels and tendernesse of a Mother, forgetting the laws of God and nature, and disregarding the checks of my own conscience, I basely and inhumanly strangled the issue of my womb…"\textsuperscript{81}

A righteous woman whose life, beliefs, and deeds were pleasing to God would never have contemplated destroying the fruit of her womb. She would have recognized his image reflected in her infant. She would have understood that “this wilfull murdering of Innocents is judged a most heinous iniquitie in the sight of God,” as stated in a prayer included in \textit{The bloudy Mother}.\textsuperscript{82} She would have feared God’s judgment.

According to the pamphlet literature, Satan permitted infanticides to consider seriously going through with this great crime, and he also made it easier for them to do so. Satan reduced the laboring woman’s pain and increased her strength so that she could follow through with the secret birth and death. The mother’s ability to bring forth a child without the aid of a midwife, and still have the resolve to kill and dispose of it, testified to the unnatural aid she received from the devil. \textit{Deeds against Nature} describes how Satan aided the notorious Martha Scambler

“Her lusty body, strong nature, and fears of shame brought an easines to her delivery, and required in her agony no help of a midwife which among women seemeth a thing very strange…but the devil we see addes force unto

\textsuperscript{80} Gods Mercy and justice Displayed, in the Wicked Life and Penitential Death of Dorothy Lillingstone (1679), 2-4.

\textsuperscript{81} Gods Mercy and justice Displayed, in the Wicked Life and Penitential Death of Dorothy Lillingstone (1679), 6.

\textsuperscript{82} Brewer, \textit{The bloudy mother} (1609).
wickednes, and puts a kind of strength to nature in that kind, otherwise had she beene discovered in the childbirth.\(^8\)

Without the Devil’s help, infanticidal women would have had “natural” births that required the aid of other women. At the least, she would have made such a racket that the household would have had no doubt which young woman had arrived at her time of travail.

We have already seen that in seventeenth century England people viewed infants as being made in God’s image. This construction contrasts sharply with the characterization of the mother as monstrous and under the influence of the Devil. Perhaps because neonates were too young to display any meaningful indications of personality – and any persons involved in the discovery of infanticide would have lacked evidence of the deceased infant’s disposition – their role in infanticide narratives was uniform. Murdered children were always constructed as “innocents.” This specific word would have immediately brought to mind the story of King Herod’s Murder of the Innocents, wherein the monarch attempted to ensure the death of the infant Jesus of Nazareth. Infanticide pamphlets referred to the infants murdered by their monstrous mothers, aided by the Devil, with a very affectionate tone: “sweet” and a “poore tender babe.” This construction of innocence reflects the salience of positive interpretations of infancy and downplays the importance of original sin. It also further villainizes the mother by contrasting the infant’s innocence with her cruelty. This contrast is enhanced by dwelling on the infant’s passive role of helpless victim in order to make the mother seem that much more barbarous. The language used to describe the victims elicits sympathy and regret from

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\(^8\) Deeds against Nature, and Monsters by Kinde (1614).
the reader. Most of the time, however, the child was not described independent of the mother. Authors employed language that linked mother and infant, even as they attempted to describe her destruction of the new life. Circumlocutions such as “the fruit of her womb,” “the fruit of her loins,” and “the issue of her womb” highlighted the enduring connection between the murderess and victim.

Unwed mothers did not always perpetrate infanticide in the popular literature. Yet authors’ constructions of midwives, grandmothers, fathers, and married women who committed infanticide further underscored the theme of grossly deviant womanhood. Two notable pamphlets featured fathers as infanticides. In both cases the men were ministers, one within the Church of England in the late 1670s and the other a hotter Protestant preaching during the early 1650s. Both narratives relate a story in which the fathers engaged in the same crimes as the “unnatural mothers” discussed above. Nevertheless, the descriptions lack the same vicious condemnation of their misdeeds; instead they hold up the men as “A Looking-glass for Murderers and Adulterers,” focusing on their path to redemption.84 Mr. Barker, the Puritan minister, confessed to a series of repulsive crimes. He had an incestuous relationship with the daughter of his “neer Kinsman”; moreover he was her guardian when “he [was] tempted to his Lust, and got her with Child, and the closer to hide his sinne, and the shame thereof from the eye of the World, and his wronged Wife, procured Savin, and gave it to her to destroy her Child."85 When the abortifacient did not work, the minister murdered the child with the help of his maidservant and the

84 J.C., The Araignment of Hypocrisie, or A Looking-glass for Murderers and Adulterers (1652), title page.

85 J.C., The Araignment of Hypocrisie (1652).
mother. Yet the description thereof is confined to the short preface, and the actual pamphlet is a sermon that Mr. Barker gave reflecting on his sins. John Crowch, the editor and printer of the pamphlet, enumerated these details of Mr. Barker’s crimes to provide context for the sermon. Mr. Barker makes only oblique references to his iniquities in his text. The conforming minister received similarly sympathetic treatment in *The Execution of Mr. Rob. Foulks*. This pamphlet is notable for its sanitized title, a feature completely absent in the other extended narratives of infanticide, which generally feature some sort of reference to unnatural womanhood. The text refrains from reveling in every gory detail of his crimes, stating them in a very matter-of-fact manner. Both men’s stories focused on their redemption through God’s boundless mercy rather than their crimes. This is no doubt in part because they were both ministers. Nevertheless, the difference in portrayals of male and female infanticides is striking.

When midwives feature in an infanticide narrative, it is usually as an authority assessing the infant’s corpse or the mother’s body. She is rarely portrayed as having the potential to destroy life, which is likely a reflection of the respect she received within the community. One narrative takes place one year after the death of the midwife, Mrs. Adkins. Her ghost haunts the house where she lived until the bones of two infants are found under the hearth. “It is conjectured that they had been Children Illegitimiate, or Bastards who to save their Mothers Credits had been Murthered, and buried there.”86 The pamphlet suggests that her “extraordinary subtilty and private policy” were problematic for the community even when she was alive; her business

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86 *Great News from Middle Row in Holbourn* (1679), 3.
should necessarily have been public in nature. The midwife was instead very secretive and (apparently) complicit in the murder of these two children. The pamphlet focuses on her restless soul. It also reinforces the persistent idea that “murder will out,” which Peter Lake demonstrates was a salient theme of cheap popular print. God would not allow evil to go undiscovered; his control over creation allowed him to know misdeeds and to make them known to others.87 The other infanticide narrative, *The Murderous Midwife, with her Roasted Punishment*, featured a French midwife who had grown rich helping gentlewomen to cover up their shame. She had assisted in the murder of sixty-two of their infants, which were discovered in the vault behind her well-appointed lodgings. She received her just reward by being roasted over a fire while being tormented by sixteen wildcats. The story is clearly designed to appeal to the fantastic, and there is no suggestion that it is actually based in truth. It is probably telling that the midwife guilty of profiting from the systematic murder of infants is French instead of English. Only the French would engage in such crimes; English midwives were much more honorable.

When a married woman murdered her child, the pamphlet literature focused on the extreme unnaturalness of her crime. Elizabeth Kennet baffled her husband when she refused to make preparations for her expected child. She gave birth when Mr. Kennet was out of the house and threw the infant on the fire. Her husband and community were horrified. The author telling her story was equally appalled that “The Devil is so busie, that scarce a day passes, but some inhumane Murder is Committed; and this which I am going to give you a Relation of, I think is one of the

Cruellest and most Unnaturallest of the Age, it being Committed by a Mother, and a Married Woman, on her own infant.”88 The fact that the mother was married is highlighted from the very beginning of these narratives. Without the obvious motivation of desiring to hide her shame, narratives are at a loss to explain the married woman’s infanticide. The story is recast as “the sad and Tragical matter of Fact,”89 instead of the logical consequence of life of whoredom and irreligion. One narrative hints at the possibility of the mother’s adultery, but mostly they rely on the influence of Satan to explain how an honorable woman could perform such a deed. She had not turned to God when melancholy or some other perversion incited her to kill her beloved child.

Grandmothers who killed their grandchildren were treated similarly to married mothers. The Unnatural Grand Mother relates how Elizabeth Hazard drowned her two-year-old grandchild while its mother was at work. The author asks, “What shall we think of the unnaturall Grand-Mother? That in stead of nourishing, and cherishing that which come at first from her own Loines, she so unwoman like and unnaturally hath now destroyed.” Although the grandmother had not labored give the child life, she was intimately connected in a line of maternity. Her own labor had made her little grandchild’s life possible. The author also makes the connection between such an unnatural crime and the religious chaos of England. Gammer Hazard had the “help of the Devil” when the story broke onto the popular press in 1659, an age when

88 The Unnatural Mother: Be a Full and True Account of One Elizabeth Kennet, a marry’d woman (1697).

Jesuits and “brainsick” Quakers were leading people “into nothing but madness and folly.”

Elizabeth Hazard was not the only woman who, in a climate of religious perversion, followed the suggestion of the Devil to kill a child. Two notorious infanticides were judged the result of wrong religion in the seventeenth century. In 1616 Margret Vincent’s sordid deeds were offered as a warning of the dangers of Roman Catholicism in *A pittiless Mother*. The pamphlet claimed that this gentlewoman murdered two of her young children because they were being raised Protestant. She came under the spell of “this blinde beliefe of bewitching heresie,” falling “into the hands of Romaine Wolves…and [having] the sweete Lamb, her soule, thus intangled by their perswasions.” Margret not only had the support of “this maxim of their Religion, that it was meritorious yea and pardonable to take away the lives of any opposing Protestants” but also “the fury and assistance of the Divell.” Her erroneous religious beliefs explained how she could perform a deed that “Pagan women that know not God nor have any feeling of his Deity will shun.” She was “more unnaturall then Pagan, Caniball, Savage, Beast or Fowle.” The author argues that she killed her children because she had been “bewitched with a witchcraft begot by hell and nursed by the Romish Sect, from which inchantment God of heaven defend us.” Roman Catholicism opened a door for the Devil. Even a married woman of esteemed birth and honorable estate could find herself committing such a heinous crime against herself, her family and her God when she turned away from true religion.

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90 *The Unnatural Grand Mother* (1659) 5-6.
On the other end of the spectrum, extreme Protestantism could lead to infanticide as well. In February 1646 (i.e., 1647) *Bloody Newes from Dover* related the story of a couple, John and Mary Champion. Their marriage was a mixed one, as he was a conformist and she was an Anabaptist. All was well until their child was born and John desired to have it baptized. Mary was terribly offended by her husband’s suggestion, so she cut off the infant’s head while he was out of the house. Upon his return, she greeted him “Behold husband, thy sweet Babe without a head, now go and baptize it, if you will, you must christen the head without a body.” This tale – perhaps apocryphal – warns the reader of the dangers of religious extremism and perversion.\(^91\) Infanticide narratives were used to condemn sects perceived as dangerous to the fabric of English society.\(^92\) According to the pamphlet literature, wrong belief and irreligion could only lead you into the hands of the devil, and once under Satan’s spell people – but especially women – were likely to perform deeds that were truly horrific and unnatural. Killing one’s own child was the archetypical evil deed for women.

But what of women who were wrongly accused? It is clear that in real life part of the reluctance to execute women convicted of infanticide to the full extent of the law resulted from the fear that innocent women might be hanged. After March 6, 1650 (i.e., 1651), there was no need for the public to worry, since Anne Greene’s

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\(^91\) There is no surviving indictment for Mary Champion of Dover, Kent, even though the pamphlet claims that she was jailed so that she might be tried at the next Assize Court.

\(^92\) This did not happen only in England, Luc Racaut has written a book chapter about accusations of infanticide as epithets used to condemn religious opponents in sixteenth century France. “Accusations of Infanticide on the Eve of the French Wars of Religion,” in *Infanticide*, ed. Mark Jackson, 18-34. (See bibliography for full book citation.)
story appeared in print to prove that God would not let a woman innocent of infanticide die on the gallows. She was sentenced to hang, according to the 1624 statute, after she “was delivered of a man-child: which being never made knowne, and the Infant found dead in the house of office raised a suspition.” The midwife claimed that “she did not beleive that it ever had life.” Moreover, the child was “unperfect, being not above a span in length.” Anne denied ever knowing herself to be pregnant. Nevertheless, she was convicted on the concealment aspect of the statute: she had not made her pregnancy known to anyone. But just as God’s control over creation could prove that “murder will out,” his control could also prevent injustices such as the hanging of innocent women. Anne was resurrected from the dead after she was taken down from the gallows to the dissection table. The pamphlet discusses at great length, and with a very clinical tone, how it was possible that Anne might have miscarried a child without even knowing she was pregnant. This discussion echoes the considerations of midwives and matrons who appeared earlier in this essay: What was the nature of the matter that passed from her body in the privy? How many weeks had passed since her last issue of blood? What was the nature of her pain when the “coagulated” matter passed? (“She could not have those throwes & passions at the time of her abortion, as women in travaile are subject unto.”) Even in print, the ambiguities attending the birth and death in a suspected infanticide – or infanticide as constructed by the law – were not completely avoided. There was a catch, however: they could only appear in narratives where the mother was innocent of any legal or moral crime. Anne was innocent of both types of guilt.

93 Watkins, *Newes from the Dead. Or A True and Exact Narration of the Miraculous deliverance of Anne Greene* (1650), 1-2, 8.
It was impossible that she could have *actively* concealed her pregnancy when she herself was unaware of it. Because she was entirely innocent, God saved her from capital punishment.

What can we learn from the murder pamphlets about infanticide? First, all of the narratives published for popular consumption – from the shortest and simplest in newsletters relaying the stories of accused persons tried at the local Assize to the most elaborate published as thick pamphlets – began with the crime, explored its discovery, and ended with the trial and execution. Character development is absent for the mother and her infant. These two primary personages in every infanticide narrative are presented as stock characters who act out the murder plot. Most of the stories that found their way into print were based on real crimes. As has been demonstrated, it was rarely easy for communities to deal with infanticide as though the matter were cut and dry, or black and white. They had to grapple with the haziness of reality. In print, however, authors stripped the story of its complexity and ambiguity. Most strikingly, they removed all of foregrounding that contextualized the pregnancy and birth. This rhetorical strategy boiled down the character of the mother until she was nothing more than an archetype, the monstrous mother who murdered her bastard child to hide her shame.

Second, the infants and children were innocent victims. For the authors the sex and age of the child victim was irrelevant. The pamphlets treated monolithically all sorts of infanticide, from the murder of neonates to the murder of older dependent children. They erased the nuances of motivation and implementation that clearly
varied in real life according to the age of the child and its relationship to the murderer. This aspect of the stories underscored the role of the murderer in the popular literature. And because most of the murderers in the pamphlet literature were women, this device highlighted infanticide as a heinous crime committed by women, especially unwed mothers.

Third, there is no sympathy for the mother or her plight in these popular narratives of infanticide; any mitigating details usually do not even enter the retelling of the story. Skipping over details of an unmarried pregnant woman’s abandonment or exploitation, the reader receives an extended discussion of the cruel manner in which the mother murdered her offspring. The murder pamphlets dwell on the horrified reactions of the neighbors’ discovery of the murder. Each ends with the just execution of the mother (or other murderess), cleansing the community and turning the woman over to the immediate judgment of God. The more complex narratives are framed within a discourse of sin and moral living, but all reduce the infanticidal woman to an archetype of female evil.

Fourth, we learn that the murderer was under the Satan’s spell. Women were believed to be more susceptible to the Satan’s powers, since they were the weaker sex and more likely to suffer from melancholy, which was an open invitation to the devil. The women who murdered children had turned their backs on God and religion, usually after a lifetime of sin had hardened them. Disobedience to parents, an inability to control one’s speech, fornication and adultery led to the unthinkable act of murdering an innocent baby. In these pamphlets, nothing was more reprehensible – to God or man – than a woman who murdered the fruit of her womb. Readers were
expected to recoil from the horrors related in the story, and the narratives were usually framed as warnings against such defilement of the individual’s soul, the ruination of the fabric of English society, and the destruction of God’s creation.

Although they were explicitly about the avoidance of sin and the pursuit of righteousness, these murder pamphlets implicitly served to reinforce the high value that English society placed on children, women, and family life. In order to drive home the extreme wickedness of infanticide, these narratives contrasted the “murder-minded strumpets” with images of ideal motherhood. The reader of Elizabeth Kennet’s story is presented with a poignant domestic scene wherein her husband tried to take an active role in preparing for the arrival of their first child. Pregnant women were supposed to announce their expectant status to the community. Mothers were expected to cherish the beautiful life that their bodies had sheltered. Women in general – including midwives, wetnurses, and foster mothers – were “naturally” cast in nurturing roles. Mothers especially were imagined to have a loving, caring, relationship with her children, bleeding for them like the pelican.
The intentional murder of infants was relatively rare in English society, yet the culture at large was very concerned about the destruction of children. Why might this have been so? Why might condemning infanticide narratives have been published repeatedly by the popular press over the course of the seventeenth century?

The seventeenth century was a time of demographic crisis, and even though infanticide in any form remained rare, it was happening with greater frequency than in earlier, more prosperous periods. A higher percentage of pregnancies were extramarital, and a higher percentage of those pregnancies ended in infanticide. In a Christian society that highly valued children, regardless of sex, as being gifts from God created in his image, child murder was indefensible.⁹⁴

At least, it was indefensible in theory. The realities were much more complex. There were real reasons why women were forced to delay marriage, and therefore sexual activity, for so much of their reproductive lives. Women’s monopoly over the creation of life made it necessary for them to control their sexuality in order to control the birthrate. Just one misstep could jeopardize their employment and their futures. Yet life went on: men sometimes promised marriage when they could not

⁹⁴ See Parker, “Fatal Secrets’: Demography and Crisis.”
fulfill their vow, women sometimes misread men’s messages, and both parties sometimes had too much to drink. The sexual exploitation of dependent women happened (then as now). When there was so much pressure on women, an extramarital pregnancy was not just about the life of the infant. It was also about the future of the woman and the ability of the household and parish to cope with providing for an illegitimate child in a time of want, when feeding an extra mouth might seriously stretch resources for those at the margins. The majority of the time, women were able to stave off pregnancy, secure a marriage, or find a way to support an illegitimate child. But sometimes she could not find a way to make that equation work out with a positive result, especially with the social shame attendant on bastard bearers. And so she pretended she wasn’t pregnant. She prayed for a miscarriage. She tried to find a way to induce an abortion. And if the time for labor arrived anyway, she found herself alone and with limited options.

It would seem from the reactions of communities and the judiciary that there was some sympathy for these women. People that knew her did not want to believe that she had murdered an infant. They tried to find alternate ways of explaining the evidence, pointing to the possibility of miscarriage or stillbirth. Juries convicted her, but judges saved her from the gallows.

Yet, even as they sought to save the mother from the whole tragic situation, the community was very aware of God’s judgment. One reason for the proliferation of infanticide narratives in popular print might be that they provided the opportunity for individuals to work out ambiguities attending the deaths of newborn infants. They could read about infanticide the way it was supposed to happen: an evil, murder-
minded harlot destroys her illegitimate child and meets her just reward on the
gallows. Along the way, ministers attempt to persuade her of God’s mercy and
redeem her soul. (Whether they succeed is usually irrelevant.) Readers are warned of
the great potential for evil that comes from abandoning God and right religion. The
story ends with everyone in their proper place: the mother standing in judgment
before God, the father (usually) excluded from the narrative, the reader warned of the
dangers of disobedience and extramarital sex.

But what about the murdered infant? Authors were certain that the infants
were not tainted with the sins of their mothers. They were adamant in their
construction of them as innocent victims. Death before baptism was not so
uncommon among England’s population, yet the question of what happened to the
unbaptized still weighed heavily in parents’ hearts. As communities wrestled with
how to make meaning of the tragic loss of another one of God’s babies, legitimate or
illegitimate, it was easier to focus on the sins of the mother.95 Making her into a
monster representing the worst of womanhood was easier to swallow than worrying
about the ultimate fate of unbaptized innocents.

Why is it important to study infanticide in early modern England? Some
might argue that this study has little relevance and that it explores the obvious. The
construction of infanticide as grossly deviant womanhood in popular culture is likely
not surprising to the modern reader, given the sanctity that Western civilization –
influenced by Judaism and Christianity – has bestowed on human life and the

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95 The idea of infants as “God’s babies” is explored at length in David Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and
Death*, 16-21; on the death of the unbaptized, see 114-117.
individual. Nevertheless, it is a valuable exercise to examine constructions of infanticide in early modern England for four reasons. First, to study the deviant is to cast light on the normative. Social expectations are frequently unspoken, so a study of grossly deviant womanhood (infanticide) will illuminate normative womanhood (pregnancy, motherhood, family life).  

Second, constructions of infanticide were often ambivalent or in open conflict. Although, child murder was usually constructed as gross female deviance according to the law and in popular print, there were enough ambiguities or contradictions in narratives of the deed – especially with regard to who was implicated with what – that the historian should be wary of accepting these constructions without questioning them. Why was infanticide constructed as a female crime when there were male perpetrators, male suspects, and male motives? Why was it redefined as a capital crime, given the mixed reaction of the judiciary following that law? Why did Parliament pass the act in 1624? Why was it only enforced intermittently? Why did communities sometimes harbor or enable infanticides? What is the fuss over infanticide actually about?

Third, the murder of infants sits at a beguiling intersection of topics that are of current interest to historians. To study infanticide is to study crime, deviance, sexuality, reproduction, and the family. It is to study women’s history and the complex relationships between genders, legal history and how everyday people negotiated the intricacies of early modern English law. This particular study, with its partial focus on infanticide in print, is also about the formation and manipulation of

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96 This rationale is given eloquent treatment in Adair, Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage, 2-3; Cressy, Travesties and Transgressions, 7-8.
cultural narratives of everyday people’s extraordinary experiences. Representations of infanticide varied according to medium in English culture: the responses of individuals, Parliament, the judiciary, and printed matter were not uniform. Does this – or should this – variance call into question cultural studies based on only one cultural medium? Printed texts provide just one window into early modern culture.

Finally – and most importantly for the twenty-first century American reader – the close examination of infanticide necessarily calls into question commonplace rhetoric that draws on a whitewashed narrative of sexuality, pregnancy management, and “the family” in the Western past in order to support particular political positions. Ours is not the first era to dispute the social, cultural, and moral meanings assigned to different strategies of managing human reproduction. Anglo cultures have struggled for centuries to find a balance among protecting new life, maintaining population stability in the face of scarce resources, and empathizing with and sheltering the woman – naïve, careless, exploited, abandoned, or misguided – who finds herself pregnant, alone, and with limited options.
APPENDIX A

“An Acte to prevent the murthering of Bastard Children”
21 Jac.I. c.27

“Whereas many lewd Women that have been delivered of Bastard Children, to avoyd their shame and to escape Punishment, doe secretlie bury, or conceale the Death, of their Children, & after if the Child be found dead the said Women doe alleadge that the said Childe was borne dead; whereas it falleth out sometimes (although hardlie it is to be proved that the said Child or Children were murthered by the said Women their lewd Mothers, or by their assent or procurement: For the preventing therefore of this great Mischeife, be it enacted by the Authoritie of this present Parliament, That if any Woman after one Moneth next ensuing the end of this Session of Parliament, be delivered of any Issue of her Body Male or Female, which being born alive, should by the Lawes of this Realme be a Bastard, and that she endeavor privatelie either by drowning or secrett burying thereof, as that it may not come to light, whether it were borne alive or not, but be concealed, in every such Case the Mother soe offending shall suffer Death as in case of Murther, except such Mother can make proffe by one Winess at the least, that the Child (whose Death was by her soe intended to be concealed) was borne dead.

And this Act to continue until the end of the first Session of the next Parliament.”

APPENDIX B

“Murder Pamphlets”
(Arranged chronologically)

1595, *Two Notorious Murders one committed by a tanner on his wives sonne nere Horne-church in Essex.*

1606, *The most cruell and bloody murther committed by an Inkeepers wife, called Annis Dell, and her sonne George Dell.*

1606, *The horrible murther of a young boy of three yeres of age.*

1609, *The Bloudy Mother, or the most inhumane murthers.*


1616, *A Pittiless Mother.*

1637, *Natures Cruell Step-Dames.*

1646/7, *Bloody Newes from Dover.*

1650, *Newes from the Dead. Or A True and Exact Narration of the Miraculous deliverance of Anne Greene.*


1658, *A True Relation of the most Horrid and Barbarous murders committed by Abigall Hill.*

1659, *The Unnatural Grand Mother.*
1670, Bloody news from Clerkenwel.

1670, Blood for Blood.

1670, The Cruel Mother; Being a True Relation of the Bloody Murther committed by M. Cook.

1673, The Bloody lover.

1673, The Murderous Midwife, with her Roasted Punishment.

1675?, Murther will out.

1676, Inhumane, & cruel bloody news from Leeds in York-shire.

1678/9, The Execution of Mr. Rob. Foulks.

1679, Gods Mercy and justice Displayed, in the Wicked Life and Penitential Death of Dorothy Lillingstone.

1679/80, Great News from Middle-Row in Holbourn: or a True Relation of a Dreadful Ghost.

1680, A true narrative of the execution of John Marketman.

1680, A true narrative of three wicked and bloddy murthers committed in three months.

1680, A sad and true relation of a most barbarous and bloody murder committed by Thomas Watson.

1686, A True and Perfect Relation of a Most Horrid and Bloody Murther [sic] committed by one Philmore’s Wife.

1690, A Full and True Relation of the Examination and Confession of W. Barwick and E. Mangall.

1691/2, Fair Warning to the Murderers of Infants.

1693, A Particular and Exact Account of the Trial of Mary Compton.

1697, The Unnatural Mother: Be a Full and True Account of One Elizabeth Kennet, a marry’d woman.
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