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**Susanne Kord**. *Murderesses in German Writing, 1720-1860: Heroines of Horror.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 276 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-51977-9.

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**Witches, Vampires, and the Like**

This smart and original book uses readings of many different kinds of texts to shed light on conceptions of gender in the German transition to modernity. Susanne Kord might well see such phrasing as overly teleological, however, since her aim is not to trace a trajectory but to uncover hidden cultural connections. She purposely turns from the respected and rational narrative of the Enlightenment to look instead at "the subordinate, the trivial, the uncanny, the irrational, the scandalous, the sensationalistic, the low brow, the unsubtle and the inexplicable" (p. 5).

The book opens with a stimulating introduction on the paradoxes of cultural views of crime and the body, especially the female body. Theories on female criminality have persistently advanced two contradictory assertions, sometimes simultaneously: first, that crime is so unnatural to women that those guilty of it are not truly female; second, that female criminality flows directly from characteristics common to all women. In either case, crime points straight to questions of female nature. Kord argues persuasively that textual treatment of murderesses, the most extreme of female criminals, reveals thinking about gender that was veiled in more polite discourse. In the chapters that follow, Kord exposes cultural ties between views of female malefactors and ideas applied to women more broadly. The opprobrium directed at murderous women–from witches and vampires to more ordinary killers–interacted with wider ideas in often surprising ways.

She looks first at witchcraft, analyzing the witch beliefs that underlay the murder trial of Anna Göldi in 1782. Instead of being dispelled by Enlightenment, she argues, witch beliefs went underground, to resurface also in descriptions of the rough-hewn poet Anna Louisa Karsch, whose oft-described ugliness and ferocious gaze mirrored the witch's evil eye. Her poetic gifts, however celebrated, had scary affinities with the demonic.

Still more adventurous is Kord's discussion of vampires, which ranges from learned debates on scientific explanations to the vampiric qualities of Snow White. Although feminist critics have sometimes seen vampires as uniquely able to transcend gender, German writers persistently assimilated them to gendered norms. The übervampiress Elizabeth Bathory, who reputedly bathed in the blood of 650 maidens to preserve her beauty, was depicted as an exemplar of female vanity or a freak of female nature. In other literature, vampires acquired a strongly sexual tinge, placing them back in the gender categories that their undead existence might seem to negate.

Turning to husband-killers, Kord focuses on two notorious cases, those of Maria Katharina Wächtler in the 1780s and Christiane Ruthardt in the mid-nineteenth century. Although both were universally believed to be guilty, their stories became pivots of public debate about the justice of torture and the death penalty, respectively. Kord sees the public discourse as embracing far more ambiguity than the legal judgment. Here the culprit could be both guilty and deserving of fairer treatment; guilty and potentially admirable for fortitude in the face of death. The public audience, in parallel fashion, could be both hungry for sensational enjoyment of gore and drawn into serious consideration of the ethics of punishment.

Literary infanticides were depicted as overcome with shame to the point of desiring death, an attitude scarcely documented in real life. Kord draws together fiction, reformist texts, and case records to show how conceptions of gender colored them all, often obscuring the decisive role played by class in the crime itself. Poisoning too, though a crime accessible to men, was continually considered in terms of female nature–a feature Kord traces in various commentators and in the case of Gesche Gottfried, who poisoned some thirty people over fifteen years while enacting the role of the virtuous matron.

The final chapter examines what Kord calls "the etiquette of execution." Here, she looks at how executed murderesses became central figures in the narratives of legal scripts and public media. While neither of these was under the women's control, their conforming behavior on the scaffold contributed to the construction of public meaning planned by authorities. For Kord, the pressures that led most to collaborate in their own execution–to abide by the "etiquette"–show how even in the age of the "theatre of horror," public power went beyond violence and staging to control behavior from within.

The book offers occasional cause for quibble. It is surprising to see no citation of Ulinka Rublack's *Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany*; even though Rublack deals with a slightly earlier period, her findings–on gendered aspects of trial and execution, for example–seem highly relevant to Kord's study. Or again, in discussing interrogation, Kord emphasizes parallels with witch trials. Yet the features she points to, such as presumption of guilt, were standard in interrogations under torture for all sorts of crimes. Kord is aware of this similarity, but her phrasing could mislead the unwary into assuming these elements were distinctive to trials of witches and murderesses.

Kord's vivid writing style enhances the book's appeal. Her imaginative readings may be more satisfying to literary critics than to historians, although she ranges beyond traditional literary territory into official documents and treatises. By design more suggestive than declaratory, her findings are difficult to summarize, but they offer much food for thought. This book is a notable exploration of the revealing underside of modern European culture.

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