

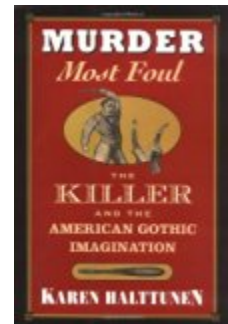
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Karen Halttunen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. xiv + 322 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-58855-4.

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Karen Halttunen's *Murder Most Foul* is an imaginative study of the changing nature of nonfiction narratives of murder in the early republic. It rests, however, on a time-honored anthropological thesis. For Halttunen, murder represents a "violent transgression" against the community. It calls "all relationships into question"—even the most intimate—and poses "troubling questions about the moral nature of humankind." The community must therefore

confront what has happened and endeavor to explain it, in an effort to restore order to the world. In literate societies, the cultural work of coming to terms with this violent transgression takes crucial form in the crafting and reading of written narratives of murder, the chief purpose of which is to assign meaning to the incident. (1-2)

Halttunen studies the "changing cultural constructions"(1) of murder in America in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries to comprehend the ways in which earlier generations of Americans came to terms with homicidal violence. In so doing, she raises thought-provoking questions about relationships in early America – especially those between men and women – and about the human capacity for evil.

Halttunen studies the secular accounts of murder that appeared in profusion in the early republic—criminal biographies and autobiographies, journalistic narratives, and printed transcripts of murder trials. These accounts "endeavored to replace the sacred narrative with a new mode of coming to terms" with murder.(3) In the colonial period, execution sermons helped readers make sense of murders. Authored by clergymen and printed as inexpensive pamphlets, these sermons offered a "formulaic demonstration that all murders were simply natural man-

ifestations of universal depravity."(4) The sermons did not demonize murderers; they humanized them. They reintegrated murderers, morally and spiritually, into the community, even as the community took the murderers' own lives, by encouraging murderers to acknowledge their guilt, to ask forgiveness, and to pray for salvation. These sermons simultaneously encouraged others in the community to recognize their own sinfulness and common humanity with murderers, and to seek salvation in their own right, lest they themselves follow the path of the condemned toward murder.

The "Gothic" narratives of murder that emerged in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries "organized the popular response to murder" in an altogether different way. According to Halttunen, they did so through two "narrative conventions." The first was horror, "which employed inflated language and graphic treatments of violence and its aftermath in order to shock the reader into an emotional state that mingled fear with hatred and disgust." The second was mystery, "which used incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives . . . to impress upon readers the impossibility of achieving a full knowledge and understanding of the crime." (3) It was, indeed, the peculiar nature of Gothic narrative "to try and fail" to come to terms with murder. (4)

Why did such discomfiting narratives supplant execution sermons? Halttunen attributes the change to the decline of Calvinism and the rise of Enlightenment liberalism, "which did not recognize radical human evil." Enlightenment liberals believed that human nature was "essentially good, rational, and capable of self-government" if nurtured in a proper environment. They could not

make sense, however, of murderers who came from good homes, who killed “without any discernible motive,” who killed “coolly and dispassionately.” That is why readers who had forsaken Calvinism turned to Gothic narratives that emphasized “the fundamental mystery of murder—its intrinsic unknowability— and its fundamental horror—the inhuman nature of the act.” (4)

Gothic narratives did not focus, as execution sermons had, on commonplace murders that grew out of commonplace sins (drunkenness, premarital sex, religious neglect). They focused instead on “shocking or bloody murders, and cases that proved unusually resistant to full and certain resolution,” because either the identity or the culpability of the murderer was in doubt. (5) Such murders—domestic murders, sexual murders, unsolved murders, and murders rooted in mental illness—challenged liberal beliefs directly. Gothic narratives helped readers come to terms with such murders, but at a price: by transforming murderers into “moral monsters” and by forcing readers to confront, by virtue of their fascination with the sex and violence in these narratives and with the inner lives of murderers, their own guilt and complicity in murder.

Halttunen sustains her argument in seven beautifully drawn chapters. “The Pornography of Violence,” for example, is an unsettling essay on the gothic narrative’s “deliberate use of pain and horror to generate readers’ pleasure, the peculiar ‘dreadful pleasure’ of imaginatively viewing terrible scenes of violent death.” (61) Halttunen attributes the emergence of that “dreadful pleasure” to the rise of a humanitarian sensibility, which encouraged “a sympathetic concern for the pain and suffering of other sentient beings,” (62) and to the movement “to segregate the dead from the living,” which concealed images of despair and decay from public view by privatizing deathbed scenes, funerals, and cemeteries (65). Ironically, “the same generation that discovered pain to be intolerable and death repulsive, discovered their pornographic possibilities as a source of dreadful pleasure, precisely because their unacceptability made them obscene.” The body “in extremis” was “illicit, titillating, prurient.” (66) Halttunen hypothesizes that the popularity of gothic narratives of murder rested on their pornographic use of violence, and on their exploration of “the problematic relationship between watching and participating in such violence.”

Though the initial impulse of the cult of horror was to establish an insurpassable moral distance between the murderer and those who read of his crime, its ultimate tendency was to implicate the readers in the murderer’s

guilt. . . . Perhaps this is why the techniques of body-horror grew ever more revolting over time: bringing the viewer closer to the murderer’s violence heightened the need to vilify the killer in an effort to reassert a reassuring moral distance from evil. And that need for distance simply ratcheted up the horror, implicating the viewer ever more deeply in the murderer’s terrible guilt. (89-90)

Halttunen’s argument rests, as she acknowledges, more on psychological theory and critical reading of texts than on evidence of the responses of particular readers to gothic narratives. But she makes the most of the evidence she has. Halttunen notes, for instance, that the “constant moral apologies and rationales” issued by the publishers of popular murder literature betrayed their awareness that reading their wares was “fundamentally a guilty pleasure.” (89) And readers of several surviving murder tracts left marginal notes that revealed a voyeuristic delight in images of violence or a personal identification with (and admiration for) a notorious murder.

“Murdering Medusa,” a chapter that examines narratives of sexual murders, is equally disconcerting. Halttunen’s critical method is here feminist and anthropological, rather than neo-Freudian. She describes a “new gynecology of guilt” that “demonized” female murder victims, even those who were chaste and above moral reproach. These narratives shifted the guilt for a woman’s violent death

from her killer to herself: physiologically different, with her peculiar sexual characteristics of blood and putrefaction, criminality and insanity; prone to disease, hence polluted and polluting; and, when fallen, inclined towards both suicide and murder.

In these narratives, the sexualized victim became the moral monster, “whose intrinsic violence and criminality justified the violence committed against her.” (207)

Murder Most Foul is an impassioned indictment of gothic murder narratives and of their continuing impact on American culture and institutions. These narratives, in Halttunen’s opinion, carried Americans away from the more humane culture of early modern America, in which “Humankind was not divided into rigid categories of normalcy and deviancy, but strung out along a moral continuum, on which all were equally vulnerable to slippage in the direction of major transgressions such as murder.” (32) The idea that murderers were radically different from the rest of humankind led to their dehumanization as criminal deviants and to their segregation in prisons and mental hospitals, “institutions which hid the horrors

of moral monstrosity from the sight of normalcy.” Such institutions, “though expressly designed for rehabilitating inmates and restoring them to society, in fact constructed impassible barriers between the normal and the abnormal.” (6) The responsibility for these failures, however, lay not in gothic narratives themselves, but with an enlightened modern culture that “still offers no systematic or satisfying way to come to terms with human evil.” (241-2)

Halttunen does not favor a return to the sacred narrative of Puritan times. But *Murder Most Foul* is suffused with nostalgia for the ability of Puritan execution sermons to heal wounds and to bind communities together. Those sermons offered solace to the murderer, the community, and (though she does not say it explicitly) the family and friends of the murderer and the victim. And Halttunen recognizes that murder raises questions that are “fundamentally theological”:

Is evil a supernatural power engaged in a timeless, cosmic struggle against the forces of Good, or do bad things just happen randomly in an amoral universe devoid of any larger meaning? . . . After the collapse of the sacred canopy, and the withdrawal of the providential eye that, in seeing and disclosing all evil actions, once imposed upon them a transcendent moral meaning, we are left with no larger explanation for bad things that happen. (242)

Halttunen hopes that newer cinematic narratives, like *Seven* and *Dead Man Walking*, may replace gothic narratives as vehicles that help our community come to terms with murder and the transgression it represents against the social order. These films arrive “by strikingly different routes” at the Puritans’ belief that “the only reliable safeguard against committing murder was to acknowledge common sinfulness with the murderer, and to be grateful for the restraining hand of divine Providence.” (246) Halttunen admires *Seven*’s fictional Detective Somerset, who believes that evil is “mundane, human, and ineradicable,” rather than “exceptional, aberrant, and stoppable,” the view adopted by Somerset’s junior colleague, Mills. And Halttunen admires Sister Helen Prejean, who does not “shrink” in horror from the murderer she counsels on death row. Prejean does not forget the murderer’s humanity (“while never forgetting or condoning” his crime) or her own sinfulness. *Murder Most Foul* concludes with Somerset and Prejean in mind:

Significantly, neither Detective Somerset nor Sister Prejean is particularly engaged with the challenge of satisfactorily explaining human evil. It is enough simply to

acknowledge its universality. (250)

Murder Most Foul is thus not only an analysis of the culture of the early republic; it is a profound work of cultural criticism and a philosophical meditation on the problem of evil.

My admiration for *Murder Most Foul* is great and my reservations are few. I cannot but wonder, however, at the different ways in which readers in the early republic may have responded to gothic narratives of murder. Are there other possibilities than those Halttunen puts forward? It does not follow necessarily, for instance, that readers sought or found “dangerous pleasure” in graphic depictions of violence, simply because that possibility inhered in the texts. Enlightened readers could have read these narratives out of sympathy for victims or a desire to understand why particular murders had happened, even if the texts themselves did not offer sympathy or closure. Readers could have provided that sympathy or closure themselves.

Halttunen shares my admiration for Daniel Cohen’s *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (1993), which examines creatively many of the same texts that Halttunen does. [1] I wish that Halttunen had stated clearly, as least in the endnotes, when and why her interpretations of texts and of readers’ responses differ from Cohen’s. Cohen’s interpretations diverge from Halttunen’s in large part because he adopts a different critical method. He roots his readings in the social history of the period. Cohen notes, for instance, that criminal autobiographies grew in popularity in the mid- to late-eighteenth century because of the contemporaneous rise of a real criminal underworld that readers needed to understand and confront. He also observes that narratives of sexual violence appealed to readers at a time when premarital sex was declining and the cultural sanctions against sex outside of marriage were increasing.[2] Halttunen does not ignore such matters altogether, but her interpretation rests so heavily on an intellectual and spiritual indictment of Enlightenment liberalism, and on textual analysis, that such matters assume less importance. The fact that murder was rare in New England from the mid-1790s through the mid-1840s may itself have contributed to the obsession with spouse murders and murders caused by mental illness, because these murders formed a larger percentage of all murders as more commonplace murders (tavern brawls, feuds, neonaticides, etc.) declined. There was good reason why execution sermons had discussed commonplace

murders more often than gothic narratives did: through most of the colonial period, there were more commonplace murders to discuss.[3]

And while Halttunen's critique of Enlightenment liberalism is just, her failure to present the diversity of liberal responses to murder and other forms of evil may not be. Enlightenment liberals did not share a universally positive view of human nature: they merely shared a view that human nature could be understood through the use of reason. And that was not merely an intellectual view; it was spiritual. Most Enlightened thinkers acknowledged openly that they did not yet understand human nature and that they were not satisfied with the state of human progress, particularly when they faced evils like murder. But they had faith that humanity's God-given reason would help humanity understand its problems and gradually lessen evil, if humans did not shirk from confronting difficult and seemingly insoluble problems. Physicians who pioneered the study of mental illness were particularly interested in extreme and inexplicable behavior, because they felt such behavior might unlock the keys to understanding not only the abnormal, but the normal brain. Many liberals had a theodicy and a calling that they found deeply satisfying, spiritually and intellectually. The question may therefore have been not why liberalism failed, but why it failed to appeal to more Americans than it did. We may never know, given the limits of surviving evidence, how readers of gothic narratives felt about Enlightened liberalism. But I fear that Halttunen may to some extent have written her own discontent with liberalism onto the popular culture of the early republic.

The appeal of gothic narratives may have stemmed just as well from the failure of romanticism to make satisfying sense of evil. Were readers of gothic narratives forsaking liberal theodicies or the romantic theodicies that M. H. Abrams describes so well in *Natural Supernaturalism*? [4] The theodicy that Halttunen offers at the end of her study is rooted late in the romantic movement, particularly in the thought of Herman Melville, who looms as important by his absence in *Murder Most Foul* as he does by his presence in Halttunen's earlier work, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*. That may be why the romantic movement makes such a brief appearance in her latest work.

Finally, Halttunen's critique of the impact of gothic narratives on American culture and institutions is well taken. But as she herself recognizes, it would require a different kind of book—a study of how communities in

the early republic came to terms with murder—to tell the whole story. For instance, because of the focus of her current research, she relies for her understanding of prisons and asylums on the work of David Rothman.[5] Rothman's work sustains Halttunen's thesis that Americans in the early republic dehumanized murderers and segregated them permanently into institutions that had little interest in rehabilitating them or restoring them to society. But few murderers were executed or condemned to life in prison in the Northeast in the 1830s or 1840s; and as I learned recently from reading through the records of the New Hampshire Asylum for the Insane, patients who were committed for homicidal behavior were indeed dangerous. All had threatened or committed violence, and all were seriously mentally ill, most suffering from what we would today term paranoia, delusions, and self-destructive impulses. In New Hampshire and elsewhere, such patients were a threat to staff members and other patients, who were routinely assaulted (and sometimes murdered) by homicidal patients. Despite such dangers, every effort was made to return these patients to their homes. Few, even among those who had committed murder, spent their lives in an asylum. In most cases, they returned home in what appeared to be an improved condition—often with disastrous results.

These facts suggest that institutional practice did not follow cultural imperative—or at least gothic cultural imperative. The dehumanization of murderers in gothic narratives may in fact have discouraged murder in general by heaping shame and public disapprobation of murderers, while leaving friends, relatives, neighbors, communities, and public officials free to treat actual murderers quite differently. We should remember that Puritan New England, whose election sermons recognized the common humanity of murderers, had a high rate of murder and, especially in Massachusetts, a thoroughgoing commitment to capital punishment. It is not clear that gothic narratives of murder—however inhumane—made the early republic a less humane place.

Notes

[1]. Daniel Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

[2]. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt*, 118-120, 167-9.

[3]. See, for instance, Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1997); and Randolph Roth, "Spousal Murder in Northern New

England, 1776-1865" in Christine Daniels, ed., *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America, 1660-1865* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

[4]. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

[5]. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston:

Little, Brown, 1971); and Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

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