

Susan C. Staub. *Nature's Cruel Stepdames: Murderous Women in the Street Literature of Seventeenth Century England*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005. x + 356 pp. + 13 illus. \$60.00. Review by SARAH SCOTT, MOUNT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY.

In *Nature's Cruel Stepdames*, Susan C. Staub presents a careful selection and discussion of seventeenth century popular press crime pamphlets to reveal a contemporary fascination with murder by women, especially by mothers and wives. Part of the Duquesne University Press Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies Series, this collection serves as a valuable resource for students of language, literature, and women's studies. The selection of pamphlets has been thoroughly modernized and annotated, making this book especially useful to readers new to the period. In its format and focus, *Nature's Cruel Stepdames* can be thought to resemble *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* by Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus.

Nature's Cruel Stepdames is organized into two parts. Part 1, "The Contexts," provides an introduction to the history of the pamphlet and to women in the popular press during the period, followed by an extensive discussion of several economic, legal, class, and gender issues central to the eleven pamphlets that constitute Part 2, "The Texts." All of the pamphlets reflect "an almost obsessive concern with female violence ... [that] is almost always domestic" (7). The selections offer a range of attitudes toward unruly women, ultimately demonstrating, according to Staub, an ambivalent attitude toward murderous women in the period (42). Staub's findings are compelling ones, and she informs them with the work of scholars including Catherine Belsey, Natalie Zemon Davis, Frances Dolan, and Christina Lerner.

The pamphlets represent the conventional stages of womanhood: maid, wife, widow. To these, Staub includes the role of married mother, given the number and popularity of stories depicting extraordinary crimes committed by married mothers. The texts included in Part 2 are arranged into four sections: wives who murder their husbands; married mothers and widows who murder their children; unmarried women who kill their illegitimate infants; and the miraculous case of Anne Greene.

The first section of pamphlets presents accounts of women violently challenging their *feme covert* status only to be reincorporated “back into patriarchy as victims” (40). Judged guilty of petty treason for murder, these women are shown to be monstrous for the domestic and natural disorder they cause. The pamphlets’ authors, however, do not assign blame to these women alone. In the account of murder by Catholic French midwife Mary Hobry, for instance, Hobry’s husband is cited for brutal verbal and sexual abuse. More overt sympathy toward women is also evidenced by these texts as in the pamphlet presenting the case of Elizabeth Caldwell that emphasizes Caldwell’s conversion to “piety and rectitude” (32).

The second section of texts addresses areas of “conflict between motherly authority and wifely submission” exhibited by married mothers and widows (42). As in the report of Hobry, religious tensions again intersect with issues of agency. In *A pitiless Mother*, Margret Vincent is shown to be a deeply misguided Catholic recusant who murders her children in Medea-like fashion in order to save them from damnation, an act described as “Popish” by the pamphlet’s author (187). Kinder treatment is given to women by the authors reporting the stories of Mary Cook and Mary Goodenough. In the account of Cook, attention is placed not upon the perceived evils of the Roman Catholic Church but upon the failure of husbands to support their wives. In the account of Goodenough, a letter resembling a mother’s advice book takes precedence over Goodenough’s transgression.

The third section of pamphlets depicts unmarried women charged with infanticide, a term including infant murder as well as infant death through various forms of neglect. These pieces reveal “[c]oncerns about primogeniture, paternity, and purity of bloodlines as well as fears about the social drain illegitimacy placed on the parish” (62). Much of the rhetoric resembles the scathing invective directed against women by writers such as Joseph Swetnam. The authors of these pamphlets emphasize relationships of shame, poverty, class, and sex. One such account is that of Jane Hattersley, who murders three of her children—all of whom were conceived by her master who denied paternity. The account of Martha Scambler, found guilty of throwing her baby in a privy, draws attention to the problems of poverty experienced by both women and men.

The final section included in this book provides one of the most unusual accounts found in pamphlets depicting violent women in the period. *News from the Dead. Or a True and Exact Narration of the miraculous deliverance of Anne Greene* by Richard Watkins tells the plight of Anne Greene, an unmarried servant found guilty of murdering her son and condemned to death by hanging. Remarkably, she survives the ordeal, and physicians work to restore her health. Rather than using her case as a means to caution against such behavior, Staub argues, Watkins presents Greene as a saintly woman who becomes “fully remade—and *remaid*—into a more socially acceptable version of womanhood” (97). Her survival is shown by Watkins to demonstrate God’s intervention in an unjust situation. (The child was eventually believed to have been stillborn.) The poems written by Oxford students, included at the end of this piece, offer additional commentary on the strange case.

Nature’s Cruel Stepdames provides an articulate and needed resource for students and scholars of the period as it invites readers to examine many of the contradictions and tensions surrounding unruly women, including anxieties about maternal power, disruptions of class structures, and interrogations into social, economic, and religious positions. For these reasons and for the ways the pamphlets challenge traditional genre divisions as well as boundaries between fiction and history, this book will complement nicely studies of canonical texts typically appearing in early modern literature courses.

Francis J. Bremer and Lynn A. Botelho, eds. *The World of John Winthrop: Essays on England and New England 1588-1649*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005. 408 pp. \$50.00. Review by WILLIAM J. SCHEICK, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN.

During the last decade or so, transatlantic context has become an increasingly important subject for scholars specializing in seventeenth-century continental and colonial history. Awareness of this context not only interrogates any notion of a distinctive cultural difference in the colonies but also challenges the impression that colonial developments had little or no impact on the settlers’ European homelands. Each homeland and its colonies did more than share history; they mutually influenced local perceptions and events. The