

## **Mummies in the Closet: A Cultural Reading of Women Murderers**

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**Abstract:**

In her book *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill* (2010) Lizzie Seal develops a typology of five discourses of womanhood as they appear in cultural and legal narratives surrounding unusual murders committed by women: discourses of the witch, the masculine woman, the damaged personality, the muse and/or mastermind, and the respectable woman. Seal's close reading of original archival material of 1950s/60s British murder cases as well as of portrayals of notorious women killers sheds light on the disciplinary nature of the discourses with regard to gender, and offers insights into symbolic meanings of femininity in 1950s/60s British culture.

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Seal, Lizzie: *Women, Murder and Femininity: Gender Representations of Women Who Kill*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 216 pp., hardcover, €63.99. ISBN: 0230222757

It was by pure chance that Thomas Harvey, son of 65-year old Sarah Harvey, discovered the mummified body of Frances Knight in his mother's cupboard. Apparently, Sarah had strangled Frances in order to pocket the maintenance money paid by the victim's ex-husband, and kept her body in the closet, walking past it day after day for almost twenty years. As the police began to investigate her case, it turned out that Frances had not been Sarah's only victim. Sarah had also murdered her second husband, her mother, and an aunt as well as five more people in order to collect their bequest. Even more striking than the scope of this murder, however, is Sarah's representation during trial. According to Lizzie Seal's book *Women, Murder and Femininity* (2010), emphasis in Sarah's representation is laid on her low economic status and her deceitful and somewhat 'rough' nature—a wicked woman through and through.

In a cultural reading of cases dealing with unusual murder committed by women, Lizzie Seal convincingly discloses the sexual politics underlying the court proceedings and press coverage. In Sarah Harvey's case, her deviancy from normative heterosexual femininity is negotiated in the repeated reference to her status as a single mother of an illegitimate child, thereby underscoring her sexual deviance. In addition, the absence of a (male) breadwinner in connection with greed is cast as derogatory, if not the actual cause of the murders. Seal claims that representations of women murderers as old, poor, widowed, and deceitful resonate with portrayals of witches. But 'the witch' is not the only type of woman murderer we encounter in Seal's book.

In the first part of the book, Seal establishes a typology of five discourses of womanhood applying them to representations of notorious women killers in Western countries throughout different historical moments. The witch is joined by the masculine woman, the damaged personality, the muse and/or mastermind, and the respectable woman.

The names of these (stereo)types already give some indication of what they are about. The masculine woman draws on the traditional link of violence with masculinity and is therefore attributed to particularly violent murder cases. Seal traces the origins of this discourse to late nineteenth-century criminology, which claims that a tendency to criminal behaviour in women is predicated on mentally and/or physically 'abnormal' features and frequently associated with

homosexuality. This notion of the 'failed' woman has continued to inform criminological research well into the twentieth century and, hence, is frequently invoked in legal discourse.

Similarly, age-old notions of psychopathy or sociopathy have appeared in judicial hearings and medical reports rendering women murderers who display lack of moral understanding as mentally and morally deranged. Seal subsumes such cases under the rubric of the damaged personality, but also cautions that the notion of 'evil' this categorization evokes may easily be misused as a catch-all term for unexplainable crimes.

Women who act as partners in crime (usually with a male partner) are represented as acting as the muse and/or mastermind. In such murder cases, legal discourse casts women either in the role of the assistant—in keeping with traditional notions of femininity—or as the dominant one in the relationship who deceives her (male) partner into committing a crime. Dichotomous constructions of this type reflect the legal difficulty of proving the degree of her culpability. According to Seal, this ambivalence "makes her ultimately unknowable" and therefore particularly dangerous (p. 38).

The least 'dangerous' of the five discourses of womanhood seems to be that of the respectable woman. Women murderers who display features of "appropriate femininity" are considered to be less transgressive (p. 63). As Seal points out, respectability is determined by traditional conceptions of femininity and also relates to notions of sexuality, class, race, and age. For example, whiteness has tended to conjure up a sense of moral superiority, making it more difficult for non-white women to attain respectability.

Clearly, Seal's typology is based on normative/dichotomous assumptions about gendered identities, which may make it difficult for feminists to endorse. After all, a rigid typological reading may limit our ways of thinking about representations of women murderers in and outside the court room to five (stereo)types. However, Seal solves this dilemma by offering a nuanced, intersectional reading of the murder cases and by taking into account the multiple subjectivities represented in the legal and cultural narratives of her study. In other words, Seal highlights the "stock-stories" that reappear (albeit in modified form) in legal and cultural representations, and that thereby perpetuate stereotypical images of women murderers, whilst reading these images with and against the typology presented in her book (p. 5). Seal concludes that representations of the murderers are, indeed, much more complex, and cannot be reduced to just one type of murderer (the witch, for example) even though judicial narratives all too often resort to such types in coming to terms with the still relatively rare phenomenon of women murderers. The question of why such stock stories are employed in criminal justice and press coverage is elucidated in the second part of the book, where Seal takes on a micro-historical perspective, focusing on a limited time frame (1957-62) and a defined space (England and Wales).

In her intersectional and contextual reading of original archival material (e.g. police reports, statements of the prosecution and defense, media and press coverage) on twelve murder cases, Seal uncovers the regulatory practices underlying the court proceedings and contends that representations of women who kill also provide information about a society's values.

With regard to the rapidly transforming post-war society of 1950s/60s Britain, Seal convincingly argues that the discourses of womanhood not only served to contain anxieties about transgressive women but also to vent fears surrounding impending modernity. According to Seal, women symbolically stood for the modern, which was associated with greater rights for working-class people, immigration, loss of imperial power, consumerism, youth culture, and the laxity of sexual morals. Therefore, constructions of intelligible femininity worked to retain "the boundaries of the normative" that women who kill threatened to disrupt (p. 166). It is hence not surprising that the legal and cultural representations analysed by Seal cast women murderers who were unmarried or childless as particularly transgressive not only because of their atrocious crime, but also because of their 'closeted', purportedly natural role as wives and 'mummies', and the symbolic significance this construction of gender entailed.

One of the few weaknesses of Seal's book is that it is repetitive in argument and structure. The outline of the book certainly prompts this. But, all in all, *Women, Murder and Femininity* offers a nuanced and illuminating analysis of representations of women murderers on a macro- and microhistorical level, and sheds light on 1950s/60s British culture. Due to its intersectional and contextual approach in relation to unusual murder cases, Seal's book presents an important contribution to cultural (feminist) criminology. And for everyone who shares a morbid interest in women keeping mummies in their closets, it is quite simply a compelling read.