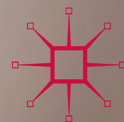
From **Pandora's Box** to **Amanda Knox**

Stevie Simkin



Cultural Constructions of the *Femme Fatale*

Also by Stevie Simkin

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Cultural Constructions of the *Femme Fatale*

From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox

Stevie Simkin
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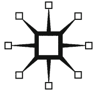

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For Aileen. For everything. For always.

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Introduction

A woman dipped in blood and talk of modesty?
Middleton & Rowley, *The Changeling*, 3.4.126

Death in Perugia

On 3 November 2007, news broke of a British student, Meredith Kercher, who had been found stabbed to death in her flat in Perugia, Italy, where she was studying on a year abroad. Within a few days, the desperately sad story took on a different cast altogether when Kercher's flat-mate and fellow student Amanda Knox, from Seattle, WA, was questioned and then arrested as an alleged participant in the crime. Kercher and Knox had been sharing a flat together on the outskirts of the town, along with two young Italian women. They had bonded well initially, but some accounts suggest that the friendship had cooled by the end of October.[1] On the morning of 2 November, officers from the Polizia Postale, a division that handles telecommunications and internet crime, arrived at the flat looking for the owners of two mobile phones that had been found discarded in a neighbouring garden. They came across Knox and her Italian boyfriend of just a week, Raffaele Sollecito, standing outside the house. The couple reported that there were signs of a break-in, and also told the officers that they had called the state police, who arrived a short time later. The locked door sealing Meredith's room was broken down and her semi-clothed body was found on the floor in a pool of blood. She had been sexually assaulted and had bled to death from deep stab wounds to her neck.

Within a few days, Knox and Sollecito, whose behaviour had provoked the intense interest of the authorities from the beginning, were questioned as witnesses. At first Knox denied having been at her flat on

the night of the murder; then, under increasing pressure as the interrogation proceeded, she finally confessed she had been there after all; she had been sitting in the kitchen and had covered her ears to try to block out the sound of Meredith's cries. However, within hours she had retracted her statement and insisted instead that she had spent the night at Sollecito's apartment. With his alibi now also in doubt, both Knox and Sollecito were arrested under suspicion of murder. A third suspect, Patrick Lumumba, was brought in for questioning after being named by Knox as the murderer, only to be released without charge a fortnight later, his alibi cast-iron (Knox claimed she accused Lumumba when she was exhausted and confused at the end of a long interrogation, and was led to do so by the direction of the police questioning). By this time, Sollecito had also withdrawn his alibi for Knox, claiming he could not be sure she had been with him all night. Shortly afterwards another man, Rudy Guede, was arrested when his prints and DNA were matched to traces found near Kercher's body. He claimed to have been involved in consensual sexual activity with Meredith in her room on the night of 1 November, but he insisted that he had not killed her: according to his account, he went to the bathroom, listened to a couple of songs on his iPod as he sat on the toilet, and returned to find her bleeding to death, with an unknown Italian standing by her body; when the man fled, Guede first tried to stem the flow of blood, then panicked and left the scene. Later the same night, however, he was seen dancing at a nightclub, before fleeing Italy. Arrested in Germany and returned to Italy, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison.[2]

Nevertheless, Italian prosecutors believed that the forensic evidence pointed to the involvement of a number of attackers, not a 'lone wolf' assailant. The DNA evidence was complex: straightforward for Guede but contestable in the cases of Knox and Sollecito. However, the prosecution remained convinced it located them too at the scene of the crime. The police had also found evidence of what they believed was a staged break-in, which made them even more suspicious that the murderers were not strangers but people known to Kercher, and the scenario developed of a 'sex game that had gone wrong' (*MOL* 5 October 2011 10:54 AM), and a subsequent cover-up, an attempt to make it look like a burglary. Sollecito and Knox were both charged with sexual assault and murder and found guilty in 2009 after a year-long trial; the former was sentenced to 25 years and the latter 26, Knox having earned an additional year for falsely accusing Lumumba. However, at their appeal in 2011, crucial forensic evidence was discredited and they

were acquitted amidst dramatic scenes at the court in Perugia. Knox returned to her home in Seattle and began to rebuild her life with her family, while working on her own account of her arrest and imprisonment, published in April 2013 as *Waiting to Be Heard: A Memoir*. Sollecito wrote about his own ordeal (*Honor Bound: My Journey to Hell and Back with Amanda Knox* [2012]) and drifted between Italy, the US and Switzerland. However, the tortuous process of Italian justice was not yet complete: a review of the acquittal by the Court of Cassation ruled in March 2013 that the appellate trial had not been properly conducted, that there were gaps and flaws in its ruling, and consequently the acquittals handed down by the appeals court in 2011 were quashed. The announcement came just days before Amanda's book was due to be published (and its publication in the UK was swiftly cancelled for fear of the legal implications). At the time of writing, the new appeal had reached the end of its course: on 30 January 2014, the original guilty verdicts were reinstated, and longer sentences imposed on both Knox and Sollecito. The case will most likely proceed now to a final appeal to the Court of Cassation. In the meantime, Knox will remain in the US; extradition could follow if the guilty verdicts are upheld at the final appeal. Sollecito will not be re-arrested until after that final judgement, although his passport has been revoked to ensure he does not attempt to flee Italy.

From Pandora's box to Amanda Knox

Unlike much scientific research (most often targeted, funded, commercially underpinned), research projects in the humanities – projects such as the one which culminated in the completion of the book you are holding in your hands – often have remarkably impromptu or serendipitous beginnings. In the autumn of 2008, I had been asked to contribute a paper for an in-house research seminar at the University of Winchester. I had chosen to talk about some work I was doing on Paul Verhoeven's 1992 movie *Basic Instinct* (the culmination of which was a study of the film in the *Controversies* book series). At the same time, I had been following out of general (rather than academic) interest the story of the murder of Meredith Kercher and the arrest and imprisonment of Amanda Knox. At the time I was preparing for the seminar, one particularly lurid headline surfaced, courtesy of UK tabloid *The Sun:* 'Knox had no pants on in jail.' The report announced, breathlessly: 'MURDER suspect Amanda Knox shocked inmates by going KNICKERLESS in

prison, it emerged last night' (*Sun* 31 October 2008). Confronted with such a story – and despite the inevitable, laughably bathetic conclusion (it emerged that Knox only had one set of underwear, and occasionally had to wash it) – it was hard not to connect Knox with the film I had been researching – one most famous for its own, in *The Sun*'s terms, 'knickerless' heroine.

The Sun's headline became the starting point for a speculative paper, an extended riff on the idea of Knox as a *femme fatale* connected in various ways, more or less obvious and more or less richly connotative, with Catherine Tramell, the playfully postmodern *femme fatale* of the film that launched a thousand mainstream erotic thrillers. It began with the parallel of both women causing a stir by their sartorial decisions – enforced or not[3] – but several more connections soon became evident: both women were accused of sexually motivated murder, one with an ice-pick and the other with a kitchen knife; there was the matter of apparently indeterminate sexuality (Tramell is famously bisexual, while, according to one headline, 'Foxy Knoxy claims female cell mate begs her for sex "because I'm so pretty" ' [*MOL* 24 October 2008 3:54 PM]); both women endured (or, in Tramell's case, enjoyed) extensive police interrogation; both were demonised for their supposed hedonistic lifestyles; one a successful novelist, the other an aspiring writer, with suspicions surrounding both for the ways they might be covering their tracks with their penchant for telling stories.

As they sometimes tend to, the ideas began to proliferate. A good friend, the author and playwright Brian Woolland, had recently been reading about Frances Howard while researching an historical novel, and, offering feedback on my conference paper, remarked that he had noticed some striking parallels between my embryonic thoughts on the representation of Knox in the media and the way Howard had been written about in historical accounts of her life, loves, supposed crimes and death – and how ideas about this seventeenth-century noblewoman accused of murder had become embedded in the wider culture of the period. And that evening, the idea for a study of the *femme fatale* at different points in history, and the overlap between 'real life' cases and mediated representations of them, was born.

For my research purposes, the timing was fortuitous. Knox and Sollecito's first trial began in January 2009, and the media interest was intense. Knox's photogenic qualities caught the tabloids' attention, and her childhood nickname 'Foxy Knoxy' quickly became ubiquitous. Fired up by the unusual and highly charged atmosphere that mingled youthful beauty, sexuality and violence, stories of Knox's sexual

history, references in her prison diaries to sexual harassment, even a college assignment she had written about rape and shared on a social media site, were pored over by reporters and their audiences. In the Italian press, she was dubbed '*la luciferina*' (devil) and 'the angel with a devil's face'. The story was extensively covered by the British press, too, and the US media interest grew during the trial, leading to a crescendo of anger at the Italian justice system as the case reached its climactic verdicts: US senator Maria Cantwell even wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to complain about the 'anti-Americanism' which she believed had tainted the trial. In the months that followed, controversy raged over a TV movie dramatization in February 2011, briefly propelling 'Amanda Knox' to Number one on the Yahoo Trends search engine (Shay 2011). One defence lawyer felt obliged to go out of her way in an appeal hearing in 2011 to protest that Knox 'may have "femme fatale" looks but is not a killer' (BBC 2011a). Like that famous parody of 1940s noir *femmes fatales* Jessica Rabbit, Giulia Bongiorno suggested, Knox was not bad, she had just been 'drawn that way'.

The *femme fatale*

The figure of the beautiful but lethal woman or *femme fatale* has a long history of having been 'drawn that way'. She is a familiar archetype in Western culture, from early modern tragedy, via British Romantic poetry and Gothic fiction, popular art in *fin de siècle* France, and *noir* cinema of the 1940s–50s, to the cycle of movies featuring psychotic females of the 1980s–90s. In fact, her roots lie even deeper: she can be traced back to the biblical story of Eve tempting Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Other figures crowd around her in this ancient gallery of infamy: there is Lilith who was, according to Jewish Talmudic-Rabbinic tradition, the exiled first wife of Adam (Hurwitz 2009, p. 87). Banished from Eden for refusing to submit to her husband's authority, she had intercourse with the evil serpent, and subsequently became identified as a form of *succuba*, having sex with men in their sleep (an explanation for the phenomenon of 'wet dreams'), and giving birth to demons. Even older is the Greek myth of the beautiful Pandora, the first woman, endowed with 'a bitch's mind and a knavish nature' according to Hesiod in *Works and Days* (1998, p. 39) and destined to provide nothing but torment to humankind. Each of these figures possesses an overt, often predatory sexuality that intoxicates and threatens the male. As we shall see, the image of the disobedient woman is also

frequently set against her polar opposite: configurations of the maternal, the chaste and the virginal. It is the familiar binary of the whore and the virgin that has been understood for many years as pivotal in conceptualising female identity in Western culture. According to Simone de Beauvoir, 'The mother, the faithful fiancée, and the patient wife provide healing to the wounds inflicted on men's hearts by vamps and witches.' De Beauvoir cuts close to the heart of the ambivalence of the *femme fatale* when she argues that the 'very complexity of woman enchants [man]: [...] Is she angel or devil? Uncertainty makes her a sphinx' (2010, p. 215).

Definitions of the *femme fatale* are familiar from the extensive scholarship she has generated, particularly in the study of the *noir* and *neo noir* genres, the form with which she is most closely associated. While *film noir* has always been hard to pin down definitively (critics have never been able to agree upon whether it is 'a genre or a style or a theme or a mood or a form or a texture or a cycle' [Bould et al. 2009, p. 3]), it remains easily recognisable nevertheless. Just as it is possible to list the key conventions of *film noir* while agreeing that not all films falling under the definition will necessarily include every one of them, likewise it is possible to distil some kind of consensus about the *femme fatale*; this from Yvonne Tasker:

> First, her seductive sexuality. Second, the power and strength (over men) that this sexuality generates for the *femme fatale*. Third, the deceptions, disguises and confusion that surrounds her, producing her as an ambiguous figure for both the audience and the hero. Fourth, as a consequence the sense of woman as 'enigma', typically located within an investigative narrative structure which seeks to find 'truth' amidst the deception.
>
> (1998, p. 120)

She is, in sum, 'overpoweringly desirable, duplicitous and sexually insatiable' (Spicer 2002, p. 90), and she uses her sexuality to ensnare the hero. In narrative terms, critics often note that containment of the *femme fatale* is a key feature of *film noir*. Typically, the dangerous woman at the centre of the plot is either killed, married off, or otherwise safely neutralised by the end of the movie, although the *neo noir* genre of the 1980s and 1990s began to subvert this convention, notably in films like *Body Heat* (1981), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *The Last Seduction* (1994) and *Bound* (1996). In addition, *noir* films often include a domesticated

woman set in opposition to the sexually transgressive *femme fatale* (Walker 1992, pp. 13–14); Janey Place refers to her as 'the nurturing woman' (1980, p. 60) while Grossman selects the term 'angel in the house' (2009, p. 93). The *femme fatale*'s antithesis can be identified in many of the primary texts under scrutiny in this present study. To a large extent, the virgin/whore meme defines the ways in which Amanda Knox and her victim Meredith Kercher have been draw in contradistinction to one another in the coverage of the murder and the trials.

The fact that the virgin/whore binary and the concept of the beautiful, dangerous woman have persisted through the centuries in spite of the gradual shifts in gender and power in Western society – both in 'real' terms and in cultural representations – suggests that her allure remains as strong as it ever has been. On the one hand, she excites feelings of desire in the heterosexual male; on the other, she excites fear, but very often her erotic charge is magnified considerably precisely because of the threatening potentiality she carries within her: in Freudian terms, she combines two distinct drives – *Eros* and the death instinct *Thanatos*. This principle has been consistent from some of the earliest *noir* films (the protagonist's sense of impending doom as he falls for Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* [1944]) to recent popular UK TV detective drama *Luther* (2010–13), where the eponymous hero (Idris Elba) is helplessly drawn to beautiful, psychotic killer Alice (Ruth Wilson), despite the fact that he knows she is guilty of multiple murder. The *femme fatale* remains a key touchstone when a more or less stable understanding of the world is disrupted by a woman who combines physical charm with danger, and she is a particularly fraught figure when the danger is embodied in the woman herself, a maelstrom of uncontrollable violence – as in the case of Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*. Such characters, especially when they cross over the line between representation and reality, tend to provoke a particularly conflicted tangle of emotions, including horrified fascination, titillation, stern reproach and damning judgement. Very often, the judgements are tied up in assumptions about women's inherent propensity towards evil: Hargrave L. Adam, writing about female criminality in the early years of the twentieth century, referred to 'that instinct for working mischief to the opposite sex which women would seem to have inherited from Mother Eve' (1914, p. 11).

Ideological constructions of women such as the *femme fatale*, the Medea-like murderous mother or the female monster are very often, and very swiftly, mobilised against women who seem to transgress

cultural norms. There are a number of different paradigms of the violent female woman, ranging from child-killers to women accused of killing their husbands (often in retaliation or self-defence after years of spousal abuse). Belinda Morrissey's *When Women Kill* (2003) offers a number of case studies and discusses the ways in which violent women are repeatedly denied a sense of agency in their crimes. However, Morrissey's study takes no account of other cultural texts, focusing solely on the representation of the cases in legal and media discourse. This study takes a different approach, attempting to weave the narratives of real crimes and the women accused of committing them with other texts – not just news media, but films, plays, novels and other forms, including 'true crime' books, biographies and autobiographies; what I will term the 'intertexts' of the real cases. Furthermore, the type of female violence I am scrutinising is more closely defined. Research into women who kill children, and women who kill their husbands or partners in self-defence, forms no part of this book. I also make a finer distinction between the archetype of the *femme fatale* and what I term, borrowing Barbara Creed's epithet (1993), the 'monstrous-feminine' (which would include cases such as Belle Gunness, Aileen Wuornos and Tracey Wiggington).[4] The *femme fatale* is a conventionally beautiful woman who lures the male hero into dangerous situations by overpowering his will with her irresistible sexuality. This is the pattern for the type familiar from *film noir* and epitomised, in 'real life', by Ruth Snyder, herself responsible for inspiring two classic early *noir* texts (and film templates), *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). Likewise, Amanda Knox was cast in many media accounts as the manipulator, planner and instigator behind the killing of Meredith Kercher, with the two men also convicted of murder cast as dupes, entranced by her sexual thrall.

The monstrous-feminine, by contrast, consists of those women whose horrific crimes are matched to their moral and, usually, their physical deviations from standard notions of beauty; women such as Rose West[5] in the UK and Aileen Wuornos[6] in the US. Much press attention focused on Wuornos's lesbianism and the fact that she worked as a prostitute, and she falls easily into the monstrous-feminine category, chiefly by virtue of her appearance and her increasingly bizarre behaviour as she apparently succumbed to some kind of psychosis prior to her execution.[7] Rose West was also the subject of intense media speculation about her sexuality, with the tabloid press predictably preoccupied with her bisexuality in accounts of the trial. In the case of Tracey Wiggington who, along with three other women, murdered a man they

did not know in Brisbane, Australia, in 1989, the emphasis was on her lesbianism and her size (17 stone) – Morrissey writes of her 'assumed masculinity' in terms of the press coverage: 'Like a freak at a Victorian fair, she was paraded in the press as the epitome of an unfeminine, unnatural woman' (2003, p. 124). According to Deb Verhoeven, a direct line was drawn between Wiggington's 'apparently inexplicable violence' and 'her physical masculinity/lack of femininity' (1993, p. 115). In this way, the monstrous-feminine criminal can be comprehended and contained in discourse via a manoeuvre that identifies them as, *de facto*, masculine.

Such 'monstrous-feminine' murderesses are instructive examples in some areas of the discussion that follows. However, this is chiefly in so far as the features of the monstrous-feminine stand in contradistinction to the *femme fatale* model; what Adriana Craciun refers to as 'the much-maligned hyperfeminine fantasy of heterosexual patriarchy' (2003, p. 15). The monstrous-feminine does not offer the troubling dichotomy of allure and danger that defines the kind of lethal woman central to this study. In addition, the hyperfeminine *femme fatale* cannot be safely defused as an aberrant form of *faux* masculinity. However, this kind of strategy for rationalising female violence is a familiar move with strong historical precedent: 'Murder by a woman was so unthinkable in the patriarchal ideology of Victorian England', writes Judith Knelman, 'that it had to be explained away as the action of a whore, witch, monster or madwoman' (1998, p. 230). Grossman, identifying two strands in the history of writing about the *femme fatale*, suggests: 'Both the view of the "femme fatale" as misogynist projection and the view of the "femme fatale" as opaque yet transgressive female force emphasize her status as object or symbol (as object of scorn or as the mysterious and opaque "other" that threatens to destroy the male subject)' (2009, p. 5). This idea of the *femme fatale* as subversive is an important one to which I will return repeatedly: the notion of the female as a threat to the stability of the patriarchy can also be traced back to early Christian teaching, and echoes down the centuries.

'Actually evil. Not high school evil': The real and the fictive

In Diablo Cody's smart satire on teen horror *Jennifer's Body* (2009), high school nerd Needy (Amanda Seyfried) tries to explain to her boyfriend Chip (Johnny Simmons) that her best friend Jennifer (Megan Fox) has turned into a form of vampire. 'Jennifer's evil,' she tells him. Chip,

who has never understood her friendship with the arrogant and conceited Jennifer, replies, 'I know.' 'No, I mean she's actually evil,' explains Needy, patiently. 'Not high school evil.' Representations in popular culture exist in a complicated, interactive network of relations to real life, and that network is traceable through hundreds of years of history. Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus, for instance, are in no doubt that '[t]he images of women found in the popular pamphlets of the [*querelle des femmes*] controversy pervade the culture of Renaissance England and influenced the lives of real women' (1985, p. 99). Regardless of the profile of the *femme fatale* in different areas of our entertainment industries, it would seem that the stereotypes and prejudices about female sexuality that they embody remain firmly embedded in our culture. Amanda Knox is in fact only the most recent in a long line of 'real life' cases of lethal women who have provided intriguing elements of crossover between historical people and real events on the one hand and the myth of the *femme fatale* on the other. The rationale for this particular study is to explore those elements. By placing a number of 'real' lethal women alongside the fictional representations that have impacted on the way we have perceived, understood, evaluated and re-evaluated them, as well as further 're-representations' of those historical women in subsequent cultural forms, we may begin to delineate a multi-dimensional model of the *femme fatale*, determine what she has signified historically, and consider what potential meanings she holds today, mediated via one specific woman: Amanda Knox, who is the focus of the final chapter.

The two case study chapters that precede the Knox chapter consider the lives and deaths of women 300 years apart. They both focus on women on trial for murder; each murder case involves a sexual element, and each woman has been represented in the recording of events surrounding the crime, trial and aftermath in such a way that she could be defined as a 'real life' *femme fatale*. Together, these cases are intended to offer a kind of historical precedent for the representation of Amanda Knox. Frances Howard (1590–1632) was accused of conspiring to murder Sir Thomas Overbury when he attempted to block her efforts to annul a loveless marriage in order to marry King James I's favourite, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, in a scandal that managed to disturb a population well accustomed to sexual misdemeanours in the Jacobean court. The aftershocks of the affair filtered into a number of plays of the period, and some of these are my primary intertexts. Ruth Snyder (1895–1928) was executed in the electric chair for assisting her lover Judd Gray in the murder of her husband in Queens, New York, inspiring

an early case of tabloid hysteria and a torrent of *noir* fiction and, subsequently, film including, as mentioned above, *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; her story was also the inspiration for the stage play *Machinal* (1928), written by Sophie Treadwell, a woman with a background as a journalist who sat in on much of the trial. Treadwell provides a radically different perspective on the case and on Snyder in particular.

The cases of Howard, Snyder and Knox will be examined to establish the ways in which perceptions of these women were shaped, and how those representations subsequently *continued* to shape the developing figure of the lethal woman. This in turn suggests the notion of an evolving *femme fatale* meme, and the possibility of tracing patterns of encoding, decoding and re-encoding between cases, eras and media, from news coverage of 'real' cases, to re-tellings of the narratives in various forms. Karen Halttunen writes: 'Any story of murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to serious transgression in its midst' (1998, p. 2). By focusing on one particular kind of crime (those involving, in one way or another, an attractive woman engaged in 'transgressive' sexual behaviour and murder), and cross-referencing the real and fictive, this study will seek to uncover those strategies, and consider what they might signify about a culture's response to this form of transgressive female behaviour.

Both historical cases studies consist of a number of layers of primary and secondary source material. For Frances Howard, the context includes the so-called *querelle des femmes*, heightened debate about the nature and status of women in early modern society, and the rise to prominence of the tragic heroine in early modern drama. Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are two variations on the *femme fatale* that remain familiar touchstones in our culture 400 years on: in their Shakespearean incarnations, the former persuades her husband to murder the king of Scotland and seize the throne; the latter tempts a great general to throw away an empire. Both men are led along paths that lead ultimately to their destruction. However, in Chapter 2 I choose to focus on a range of *non*-Shakespearean tragic heroines caught up in sexual intrigue and murder, all connected, directly or indirectly, to Frances Howard herself. For Snyder, cultural anxieties about the emergence of the 'new woman', the rise of the 'flapper', Prohibition and the jazz age sensibility inform the understanding of her crime and character, and in her wake the *femme fatale* of *film noir* would light up the cinema screen.

The significance of the case studies lies in the weight of evidence they accumulate for identification of a certain kind of circulation of social energy:[8] women like Howard and Snyder are cycled through a set of assumptions, filters which reinforce familiar stereotypes in the way they are perceived, and then imprint the dominant popular perceptions of them. As David Lindley writes about Howard, once the idea of the '"wicked woman"' is in place, 'stereotypes [...] take over and determine the nature of her representation. [...] With a dreadful circularity Frances Howard grows into the standard image of the infamous female and the blanks of her life are filled in from the model' (1993, p. 75). As I will show, the process Lindley describes could apply equally well to any of the women under scrutiny, including Amanda Knox. What is more, the historical case studies should illuminate the ideological forces that have shaped our perceptions of women accused of terrible crimes. There is a well-defined link between the stories we forge from the past, and the way we make sense of the present (Lindley 1993, p. 12).

A disclaimer. Those looking for a perspective on whether or not Knox participated in the murder of Meredith Kercher should look elsewhere. I take no position on Knox's guilt or innocence, and the case study in this book should not be misinterpreted as a defence of Knox and a portrait of her as a victim of a miscarriage of justice; neither do I suggest that the media coverage necessarily had an impact on the deliberations of the judges charged with assessing her guilt, and determining her sentence. As many commentators have pointed out, sequestered juries are today more the exception than the norm, and those sworn in as jury members, or lay judges (under the Italian system), are fully aware of their responsibilities to weigh guilt and innocence solely on the basis of the evidence presented in court. However, it is my contention that Knox was swiftly encoded in quite specific ways that relate very powerfully to the *femme fatale* meme, first by the media, particularly in the Italian and the UK tabloid press, and then by a network of discursive forces active on the World Wide Web. The purpose of the study is to assess how Knox fits into the pattern of ideation and discourse around the *femme fatale* archetype that will be established in the preceding chapters. The intended outcome, then, is not an exoneration of Knox. In the same way, I do not take a position on Frances Howard's involvement in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. The point is not to argue innocence, but to reach a clearer understanding of the different encodings and decodings of Knox (and her antecedents) within the lethal woman paradigm.

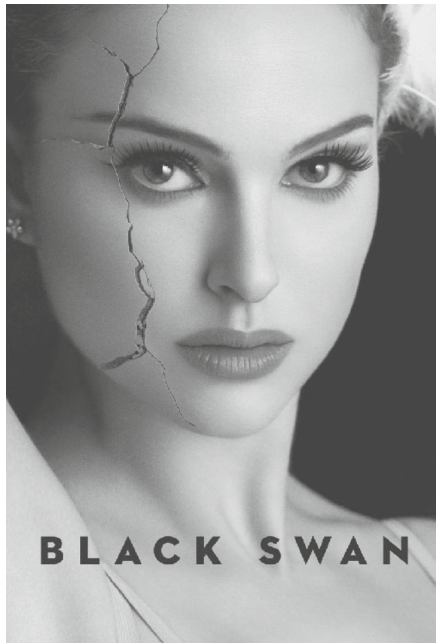
The crossover of the authentic and the representational, the real and the fictive, is always in evidence when we read accounts of newsworthy events; journalists will habitually make links between crimes and familiar landmarks of popular culture. The breaking of the Amy Fisher story, for example, was accompanied by headlines such as 'Lethal Lolita' (referencing Nabokov's novel and Kubrick's film adaptation) and 'Teen Fatal Attraction' (with a nod to the Michael Douglas/Glenn Close erotic thriller [1987]). Amy Fisher was 17 years old when she shot the wife of her lover Joey Buttafuoco in the face; Mary Jo Buttafuoco survived, Fisher served six years in prison (and Joey six months for statutory rape). The case caused such a sensation that all three major US TV networks put movies into production retelling the sensational story.[9] In an interesting example of the real/fictive crossover, the star of one of them, Drew Barrymore, came fresh from the role of another teen *femme fatale* in *Poison Ivy* (1992), where her character had seduced her best friend's father.[10] Meanwhile, *Amy Fisher: The Musical* was a cult hit in Greenwich Village, and TV personality Geraldo Rivera taped a mock trial, with members of the usual studio audience as jurors, giving the *Geraldo* show its best viewing figures in New York in five years (Dominguez 2001, pp. 273–7).[11] As Helen Birch noted at the time of Fisher's attack, remarking on the rise in representations of female killers in Hollywood film, 'the always shifting boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and representation, have in some cases become so blurred as to be almost indistinguishable' (1993, pp. 2–3). This study is predicated on precisely that shift, that blurring: the interaction of the real and the fictive is at the heart of its conceptualisation and methodology.

Tony Bennett suggests that 'popular fictions regulate our sense of ourselves and structure our daily lives' (1990, p. iv), and proof of the extent to which our understanding of our world is refracted by popular culture is all around us. In the midst of the blogs, Op-Eds and forum discussions of the wider significance of the trial and conviction of Amanda Knox, one article by a couple of student correspondents asked the question: 'Did MTV pave the way for Amanda Knox's guilty verdict?' The piece finally has little to do with Knox herself, but is significant for the way it traces reciprocal connections between Hollywood fantasy and reality, identifying how the ubiquity of the Hollywood image impacts on the way we perceive the world around us. The article quotes a 28-year-old Israeli, who laughs: 'When we think of American girls, we think of pillow fights and girls running around

half-naked [...] just like the women seen in movies about "typical" college life.' He seems ready to concede that these movies invoke 'extreme stereotypes' that are probably unrealistic, but at the same time the reporters suggest that he 'doesn't sound entirely convinced' that they are nothing but caricatures; certainly he hopes they are real (Javetski and Escobar 2010). The gap between rational judgement and wishful thinking, it would seem, can be hard to measure with any degree of certainty.

One way of understanding this kind of blurring of reality and fantasy is via a case analysis of the hegemonic reach of Hollywood product. Philip Green, with a nod to Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', notes that 'the primary characteristic of the Hollywood style is that the commodities of dominant visual culture appear before us as objective evidences of the world, rather than as subjectively authored

Figure I.1 Poster art for *Triangle* (2009), *Black Swan* (2010), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Single White Female* (1992)



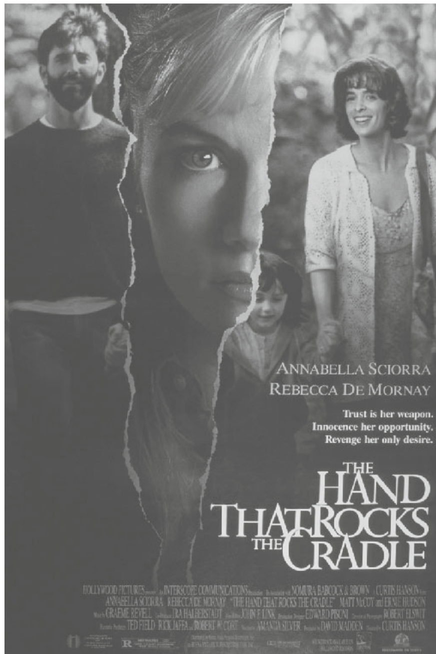
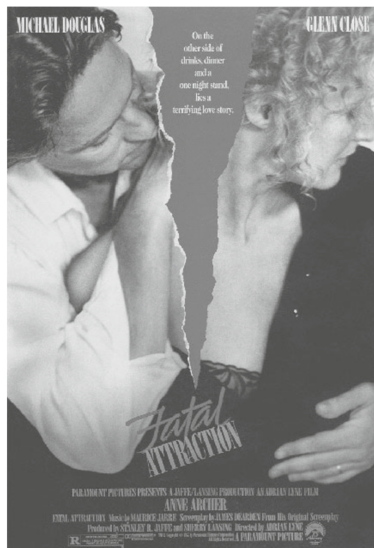


Figure I.1 (Continued)



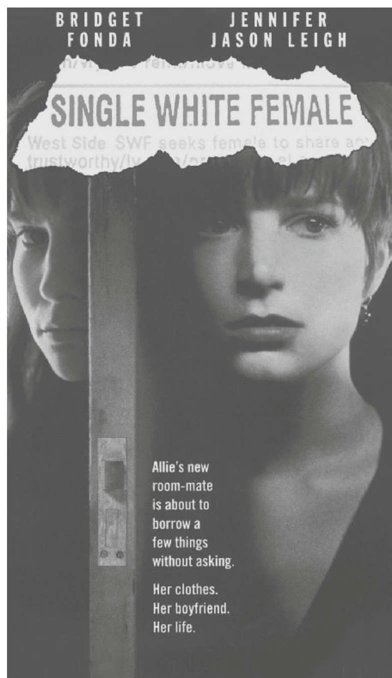


Figure I.1 (Continued)

interpretations of it' (1998, p. 17). Green proceeds to exemplify the process via a reading of new *noir* cinema – movies such as *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992) – which posits that such films 'tap into hysterical fantasies about female vengeance' (p. 195).

Another attempt to account for radical departures from accepted models of femininity is traceable in the 'split personality' ideation, significant, as I will show, in representations of Snyder and Knox in particular, and evident from a cursory survey of a number of recent films featuring shocking female violence. The stock premise is of a radical disjunction between good and evil, sanity and psychosis, in their female protagonists: so Christopher Smith's intriguing movie *Triangle* (2009) finds young single mother Jess (Melissa George) repeatedly reliving a disastrous boating trip: blown off course into the path of a deserted ocean liner, she and her friends come under crazed attack from a hooded assailant who turns out to be another, time-shifted incarnation of Jess herself. In Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010), a ballerina is cajoled and bullied by her director into discovering the 'bad girl' beneath her 'good girl' exterior that will be capable of dancing the eponymous part as convincingly as she dances the white swan; the journey, somewhat inevitably, connects her 'inner black swan' with her sexuality, and covers a number of rather over-familiar bases along the way, including masturbation, associations of blood, sex and shame, an experimental foray into lipstick lesbianism, and supposed fulfilment in a performance that ends, predictably enough, with her death. In fact, the portrayal of the violent female in terms of a split personality is not new, underpinning as it does many of the lethal woman films of the 1990s, in terms of both script, performance and, often, directorial choices: *Single White Female* (1992), for example, like *Black Swan*, is wearisome in its fixation on mirror images. As the poster art reproduced in Figure I.1 illustrates very clearly, there is a striking degree of conformity to this familiar concept: the tear, the split, the crack, and the shadow or the mirror image of the fearful Other.

A trailer for the cable TV movie *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* (2011) follows the same pattern, as it cross-cuts from the prosecutor Mignini telling assembled journalists, 'under the angel face, she is capable of anything', to the subtitle 'there are two sides . . . to every story'; it also splices Amanda's mother Edda Mellas' desperate declaration 'she is kind, she is gentle' with Rudy Guede's 'she's evil', cut to sound like a riposte to Edda's pleading. As we shall see, this conceptualisation of Knox as a divided personality, a female Jekyll and Hyde, or of a young

woman morally disfigured beneath a surface of conventional beauty, dominated much of the press coverage, as journalists and their readers struggled to find a frame of reference for such an unusual crime (it is also very evident in the other case studies, as I will show). Even Knox herself would invoke the same discourse when, in a last statement before a verdict was handed down, she confessed she was afraid of having 'the mask of the assassin forced on to me [...] afraid of losing myself, afraid of being convicted for something I am not and something I did not do' (*Times* 4 December 2009). In the wake of her conviction and sentencing to 26 years' imprisonment (and subsequent acquittal, the quashing of that acquittal and another trial), the process continued, as the struggle to fix the image of the 'real' Amanda Knox was fought out over blogs, Facebook accounts, internet discussion forums and in the screeds of reader replies to online news reports. Once again we find society attempting to rationalise the violent woman, to make her 'make sense' when she seems to depart so radically from accepted notions of femininity.

This study, then, is an interdisciplinary one which, via linked case studies, seeks to trace the figure of the *femme fatale* across a broad cultural map, utilising a range of related methodologies: analysis of cultural texts (literature, drama, film, TV), media and communication studies, psychology, and theories of crime and punishment. The book seeks to establish a clearer understanding of the ways in which these 'real life' lethal women are encoded (particularly via news media), decoded by audiences (influenced by dominant, shared cultural images) and re-encoded (in subsequent biographies and novels, as well as in film, on TV and in the theatre). Chimène I. Keitner argues: 'How we measure, study, and understand criminals and their victims is inextricably bound up with the normative and ideological framework within which we comprehend social interactions as a whole' (2002, p. 80). The working hypothesis of my investigation posits that, in the representation and the re-presentation of each of these lethal women, one can trace Western culture and society struggling to comprehend and contain female violence.

According to Richard Altick, 'Murder trials, if held to the light at the proper angle, are an almost unexcelled mirror of an epoch's mores' (cited in Gordon and Nair 2009, p. 5). By refining this down to an analysis of one particular type of (suspected, accused and/or convicted) murderess at several different points in history, the light should reveal a visible pattern of recurring obsessions, as society makes repeated attempts to

assimilate the anomaly of the alluring but deadly woman, conjuring a startling array of spectral fears along the way: female promiscuity; hysteria and connections between unbridled sexuality and insanity; shame, menstruation and other related instances of gynophobia; and an obsession with beauty concealing profound evil.

1
Defining the *Femme Fatale*

I would sooner have danced than supped with her.[1]
John Inglis, Madeleine Smith's defence lawyer

Introduction

The intention of this first chapter is to trace some of the key elements of the 'genetic makeup' of the *femme fatale* in Western culture, exploring how key myths and stereotypes of female character and behaviour, particularly in relation to transgressive or dangerous sexuality, have been established over time. Although there is a brief discussion of the early modern, modern and contemporary eras, the more specific analysis of the evolution of the *femme fatale* in different time periods is reserved for the case study chapters that follow. The exception is the nineteenth century, where a section in this first chapter allows a little space to consider this important era in the emergence of the *femme fatale* meme, with a brief case study that prefigures some of the most significant elements of the studies that follow. However, the opening overview is primarily intended to provide a vista of the ancient roots of the lethal woman in Western religion and mythology, and to look in more detail at the way one particular construction of the 'deviant' female – the *femme fatale* – has underpinned the understanding of female criminality. The book's attention switches constantly between, and in some places merges, representations of the 'real' (historical cases) and the fictive (their intertexts in such media as literature, drama, film and television). Central to my argument is that there is an on-going, inductive process which subsumes these real and fictive lethal women, with the figure of the *femme fatale* evolving and crystallising over time. Julie Grossman refers to 'a habit of projecting ideation about the "femme

fatale" onto real women', and notes that '[t]his kind of blurred association of women in noir with gender phantoms keyed to "real life" results in a continual reassertion of the "femme fatale" as a fixed object and category' (2009, pp. 48–9). Grossman points to the tendency to collapse distinctions between actress, character and the *femme fatale* persona as further evidence of this process, a process that I will show is critical to an understanding of each of my case studies, most acutely in the case of Amanda Knox, whose elevation to the status of celebrity murderess in the coverage of the killing of Meredith Kercher throws the relationship between the real and the fictive into high relief.

The *femme fatale*: Opening Pandora's box

Janey Place writes that '[t]he dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture' (1980, p. 35). The conspicuousness of the *femme fatale* in Western culture has waxed and waned; she features heavily in the tragic drama of the early seventeenth century and was something of an obsession for a number of poets and novelists in the nineteenth century and in popular art in *fin de siècle* France. She became ubiquitous in Hollywood *film noir* of the 1940s and 1950s, the genre with which the term *femme fatale* is most closely associated, as well as the *neo noir* of the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the beautiful but deadly woman is as old as the earliest Judaeo-Christian scriptures and Greek myths, the latter a rich resource for writers down the centuries aiming to justify misogyny. Hesiod's mythical creation Pandora is a perfect example. According to the myth, Pandora was created in the wake of Prometheus's attempt to steal fire from the gods and give it to humankind. Pandora was Zeus's punishment for Prometheus's disobedience. The eighth-century poet Hesiod describes her as ' "a sheer, impossible deception" characterized by "lies, and wheedling words of falsehood, and a treacherous nature" ' (cited in Henderson and McManus 1985, p. 5). In *Theogony*, she is presented to 'both immortal gods and mortal men' and 'they were seized with wonder when they saw that precipitous trap, more than mankind can manage' (Hesiod 1988, p. 20). While the biblical account has Eve punished for her sin with the pain of childbirth, in Hesiod's myth it is men who are punished: 'For from her is descended the female sex, a great affliction to mortals as they dwell with their husbands – no fit partners for accursed Poverty, but only for Plenty' (a torturous way of accusing women of profligacy). He continues:

'As a bane for mortal men has high-thundering Zeus created women, conspirators in causing difficulty' (pp. 20, 21). The account in *Works and Days* specifies the roles of different gods in her genesis, Ambidexter (Hephaestus) creating 'the likeness of a modest maiden', the Graces 'and the lady Temptation' putting gold necklaces around her body, while Hermes fashioned in her 'lies and wily pretences and a knavish nature' (Hesiod 1988, p. 39). Pandora herself does not embody the evil visited on the mortal world, but her curiosity prompts her to take the lid off the jar that contains all the misery that humankind had formerly lived free from: 'ills [...] harsh toil [...] and grievous sicknesses that are deadly to men'. Only Hope remained 'under the lip of the jar' and was prevented from flying out by the will of Zeus (pp. 39–40). As we shall see with Eve, the emphasis is on beauty, temptation and the misery woman brings to (hu)man(kind).

Circe, the sorceress who had a custom of turning those she lured into animals, falls into the same category of fatal seductress. She is most familiar from her association with Odysseus who, travelling home after the fall of Troy, lands on the island of Aeaea. Almost his entire crew is drugged and transformed into pigs before being rescued by their master, rendered immune to her spells by a herb given to him by Hermes the messenger god. However, although Circe is referred back to in some later descriptions of the *femme fatale*, the more striking and culturally resonant figure is Medusa. She is probably most familiar in contemporary popular culture via the logo of the fashion designer Gianni Versace (1956–97); Versace claims he adopted her image because of the associations with 'classicism' and a 'sense of history', but also because 'Medusa means seduction ... a dangerous attraction' (cited in Garber and Vickers 2003, p. 284).

According to Ovid, Medusa was a woman of renowned beauty, 'the jealous hope / Of many a suitor, and of all her charms / Her hair was loveliest' (*Metamorphosis,* Book 4, 883–5) (Ovid 1986, p. 98). After Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, Athena punished her by transforming her hair into serpents and giving her a face that would turn men to stone. It is not uncommon to find female victims of sexual violence being victimised further by reinforcing and exacerbating the feelings of guilt and shame that are, for complex historical, cultural and psychological reasons, very often significant elements of suffering in the aftermath of an attack. Shakespeare's brutal revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus* finds the eponymous general citing ancient precedent as justification as he slaughters his raped and mutilated daughter Lavinia: 'the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew

[her father's] sorrows', he tells the assembled company (5.3.40–1). It is a singular cruelty the patriarchy has historically inflicted upon some of the most vulnerable victims of its ideology. However, what concerns me here is not Medusa's punishment but the implications of this odd evocation of beauty transmuted into something lethal. It seems to incarnate a number of male anxieties about female allure, and connects with the bait of the forbidden which, as I will show, is central to the ideation of Eve, the most significant figure in Western myth in terms of understanding what it means to be a woman. In the sixteenth century, Natale Conti wrote that '[t]o demonstrate how constant we must remain in our confrontation with pleasures, the sages depicted Medusa as the most beautiful of women [...] but all who saw her the ancients said were changed into stone by her'; Conti believed the moral to be 'lust, boldness, and arrogance must be restrained because God is the most exacting avenger of these flaws' (cited in Garber and Vickers 2003, p. 62). Medusa would become a muse for, among others, Petrarch (who used her as an index for the depth of his love for his adored Laura), Leonardo da Vinci, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Goethe, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and, in a very different way, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. For Freud, she symbolised the female genitals, and so embodied the male's castration anxiety (and, in Freud's typically tortuous logic, the snakes on her head are inevitably phallic); for Marx, she represented the hidden evils of capitalism. In 1975 Hélène Cixous reconfigured her as a subversive, feminist figure challenging patriarchy: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (1975, p. 885). Cixous's characterisation is by far the most intriguing, and I will return to her essay as a key conceptual strand in the conclusion when I take stock of what I have found.

Myths aside, perhaps the most vicious, sustained attack on womankind in the classical era comes courtesy of a Satire written by Juvenal (c. AD 55–127) which provides an exhaustive list of women's supposed faults. The *persona* adopted in Juvenal's Sixth Satire is strictly speaking misogamist rather than misogynist: the speaker in the satire suggests to the addressee, Postumus, who has asked advice about taking a wife, that suicide is preferable to marriage. The targets of the satire are too numerous to enumerate here, but they include their supposed faithlessness and promiscuity ('Tell me, will Hibernia / Think one man enough?'), profligacy, litigiousness, shrewishness and duplicity (Juvenal 1967, pp. 128–37). The description of the 'pure female / Urge' (lust) culminates in a vision of an orgy: if their lovers cannot satisfy them, the wives call on

their slaves; and if men are in short supply, 'they're ready and willing / To cock their dish for a donkey' (p. 139).

Juvenal channels all of his misogyny in a very focused fashion into his portrait of Messalina, wife of the Roman emperor Claudius (10 BC–AD 54). In the Sixth Satire, Messalina is referred to as the 'whore-empress' who, once her husband was asleep, would disguise herself with a blonde wig and 'make straight for her brothel', where 'A more than willing / Partner, she took on all comers, for cash, without a break', always the last to leave, 'still with a burning hard on, / Retiring exhausted, yet still far from satisfied', and wandering back to the palace 'carrying home [...] the stink of the whorehouse' (Juvenal 1967, p. 131). Messalina was drawn so vividly by a number of historians, including Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Elder and Juvenal, that her name has been used as a synonym for nymphomania ('Messalina complex'). Pliny refers to one particular story intended to illustrate her insatiable nature: 'Messalina, the wife of Claudius Caesar, thinking it would be a royal triumph, chose to compete against a certain young servant girl who was a most notorious prostitute, and, over a twenty-four-hour period, beat her record by having sex with twenty-five men' (Pliny the Elder 1991, p. 148). The veracity of the story is impossible to determine, of course, but, as Mary Beard points out, one of the paradoxes of a patriarchal culture is that it has a strong tendency to imagine women as 'fantastically dangerous and in need of all the kind of male control that men can actually offer them' – hence the plethora of images of women as oversexed (cited in McIntyre 2012). Inevitably, re-imaginings of Messalina in fiction, on stage and on screen have tended to centre on this most salacious reported detail of her life, including Robert Graves's novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (1934–5), subsequently adapted as a highly successful UK TV series *I, Claudius* (1976).

The image of the insatiable woman remains an alluring one in the fantasies of male heterosexuality, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the deep-seated fears it conjures at the same time (of infidelity, and of the male failure to satisfy women's supposedly fathomless sexual appetites). However, the figure of Eve is obviously a foundational one in understanding the rise of the myth of the deviant woman in a culture founded on Judaeo-Christian tradition and teaching. Kathleen McLuskie remarks how '[m]isogynists from the Church fathers onwards insisted on woman's direct descent from Eve which gave her the attributes of lust and duplicity' (2000, p. 105). Eve's weakness in allowing herself to be deceived and tempted by Satan, in the form of the phallic serpent, is seen as the trigger for original sin, which in turn led to the Fall and

the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. While both Adam and Eve ate of the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge, the Genesis account unequivocally identifies Eve as the instigator: persuaded by the serpent that she will not die if she eats of the tree in the middle of the garden, only that her eyes 'shall be opened', she 'took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat' (Genesis 3:5–6). Adam is quick to redirect the blame when God asks why he has eaten the forbidden fruit: 'The woman thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat' (3:12). When Eve diverts the blame to the serpent, God punishes each of them: the serpent is destined to crawl on its belly, the woman is cursed with the pain of childbirth (while, in addition, 'thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee') and the man will have to work the land to bring forth the produce that Eden had up until then freely provided: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (3:13–19).

For John A. Phillips (1984), the Old Testament Eve maps closely onto the myth of Pandora; the trickster god Hermes, the one who imbued her with her 'knavish nature', is the equivalent of the serpent; the eating of the fruit parallels the opening of the jar; and the outcome of each story is the same, with the earth turned from a paradise into 'a problematic place where hard labour, birth and death are facts of life' (Phillips 1984, p. 19). Phillips also notes how the Church Fathers picked up on the Pandora myth in order to complete the story of Eve and how they perpetuated the misogyny of late Greek civilisation. He quotes Theodore Reik's observation that 'the vessel in which all evils are contained represents the female genital [*sic*]' (cited in Philips 1984, p. 23), bringing us back to Freud again. Paul's first letter to Timothy confirms the orthodox interpretation of Eve's action in his justification for not allowing a woman to teach in church: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection [...] For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression' (1 Timothy 2:11–14). The Church Fathers believed the fact that Eve was the one to be tempted was clear evidence that the woman was, and was perceived to be, the weaker one; commentaries and stories around the Adam and Eve narrative sometimes included an encounter between the serpent and Adam where he rejects the invitation to eat of the forbidden fruit. There is also a clear connotation of sexual transgression in Eve's sin. Not only is the serpent an over-obvious phallic symbol, but the fact that, after they ate of the tree of knowledge, 'the eyes of them both were

Figure 1.1 Michelangelo's 'Temptation and Expulsion' (1511)

opened, and they knew that they were naked' strongly implies a sense of sexual shame (Genesis 3:7). Michelangelo's 'Temptation and Expulsion' (1511) (Figure 1.1) is particularly rich in its sexual connotations. It looks for all the world as if Eve has been interrupted in the course of performing oral sex on Adam, as she turns to receive the fruit offered to her by the markedly feminine serpent. The fruit itself is a fig, which Phillips notes would have specific connotations for sixteenth-century Italians: the word *fico* is close to both *fica* (vulgar term for female genitals) and *ficcare* (to fuck) (1984, pp. 68–9).

Early theologians including Tertullian, St John Chrysostom and St Augustine issued frequent warnings about, or tirades against, dangerous womankind: 'attractive snares and sources of temptation who are inherently weaker than and inferior to men' (Henderson and McManus 1985, p. 7). Tertullian described woman as 'the devil's gate [...] the first deserter of the divine law', and St Anselm declares: 'woman, "this milk-white creature", has a lovely form, [...] "but if her bowels were opened and all the other regions of her flesh, what foul tissues would this white skin be shown to contain"' (cited in Billington 1988, p. 198). St Jerome conjures Messalina's spirit when he warns that female lust 'is accused of ever being insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man's mind, and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds' (cited in Henderson and McManus 1985, p. 8). Indeed, for Jerome, in an infamous phrase, woman is the root of all evil.

The figure of Lilith, mentioned briefly in the introduction, bears some scrutiny before I move on. According to the Talmud, Lilith was the first woman, formed not from pure earth (like Adam) but from 'filth and

sediment' (Graves and Patai 1983, p. 65). Because (unlike Eve) she had not been created from Adam's rib, Lilith saw herself as Adam's equal, and refused to lie beneath him when they had intercourse. When he tried to coerce her, she fled in a rage, alighting beside the Red Sea, where she consorted with 'lascivious demons', refusing to return when ordered to do so by God's angels. 'How can I return to Adam and live like an honest housewife, after my stay beside the Red Sea?' she mocked (p. 66). In the Talmudic literature, and again in the Kabbalah[2] (Jewish mystic texts from the Middle Ages), Lilith takes on two of the key features of the *femme fatale*: a refusal to submit to patriarchy's rules and a powerful sex drive that strikes fear – of impotence, of defeat or of mortal danger – into the heart of man. In a fusing of Christian, Jewish and classical tradition, in the nineteenth Canto of the *Purgatorio* Dante portrays a Siren that, in a dream, tries to lead the poet astray. Withered and ugly at first glance, she is rendered beautiful by the poet's fascinated gaze. This is Lilith, the *succuba* who visits men in their sleep. A holy lady quickly brings him to his senses, and the poet's companion, Virgil, tears open her robes to expose her belly; the poet is awakened by 'the smell, / Exhaling loathsome' that emanates from her body (Dante 2013, p. 82). This will be a recurring motif – the beautiful surface, and ugly corruption beneath. Lilith, even more than Eve, is the prototypical *femme fatale.*

Early modern lethal women

My case studies begin in the early years of the seventeenth century, a time when the misogyny that was embedded in civic law, cultural practice and simple human relations is very legible in the drama of the period. I mentioned two examples in passing in the introduction: Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are both unusual women in the catalogue of Shakespearean characters for the overt displays of power that define them. The former is, in the first half of the play, the driving force behind her husband, spurring him on to murder King Duncan in order to clear his own path to the Scottish throne, when his better nature (or his cowardice, or both) has led him to determine that 'we shall proceed no further in this business' (1.7.31). Lady Macbeth has already invited the 'spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts' to 'unsex' her and fill her 'from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty' (1.5.39–42). Fearing that her husband is 'too full o' th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.16) – in contemporary terminology, he needs to man up – she has invited those murderous spirits to 'Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall' (1.5.46–7), and to make *her* the man her husband

apparently cannot be. Her dominance over Macbeth, and her mockery of his masculine honour ('When you durst do it, then you were a man' [1.7.49]) prevails although, like so many *femme fatales,* she is ultimately contained and neutralised: she is shut out of Macbeth's plotting once the initial pair of murders have been committed ('Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed', he tells her; run along now... [3.2.48–9]), and in the end her guilt and her stubborn determination to deny her 'true' feminine identity precipitates insanity and then suicide.

In some senses the reverse of Lady Macbeth, what Cleopatra lacks in the *fatale*, she makes up for in the *femme*. If the former edges closer to the monstrous feminine model (though her coaxing of Macbeth is often staged as a kind of seduction, notably in a famous and influential 1976 RSC production),[3] Cleopatra is a more conventional model of fatal beauty, even if physical violence is reserved for her servants (in semi-comic mode) or herself, in her own climactic suicide. Suicide is always a more powerful form of containment, since it shows the woman internalising the patriarchal perspective on her apparent transgressions, conceding that she deserves nothing better. Cleopatra was a familiar figure in the Western imagination before Shakespeare chose to dramatise her affair with Mark Antony, one of the triumvirs of Rome. Regularly referred to in classical histories as the 'prostitute queen' (Stanton 2002, p. 93), Shakespeare's depiction of her as a threat to patriarchal values, embodied in the warrior-hero-turned-indolent-slob Antony, follows in an established tradition: Mary Beard identifies the source of the characterisation as Emperor Augustus and his propaganda campaign to 'demonise Cleopatra as a dangerously seductive Oriental despot' entirely at odds with the 'down-to-earth traditions of Rome' that he claimed to represent (2013, p. 121). However, the myth has proven indelible, and although Shakespeare's play fell into obscurity when it was superseded by John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677), it returned to dominate the Victorian stage, where Cleopatra 'became the very type of the Romantic *femme fatale*', according to Michael Neill: 'the supreme object of forbidden desire whose achievement constitutes its own punishment' (Neill 1994, p. 40).

However, while these two Shakespearean women have become iconic, there are many more fascinating female characters that populate the plays written by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Women such as Isabella in *The Insatiate Countess* (1610), Vittoria in *The White Devil* (1612), the title character of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* (1622) are portrayed as slipping loose the

patriarchal reins and by using their sexuality, asserting it, or both, challenging the established order. The corrosive ideology that dictates such women should be swiftly classified as deviant, dangerous and in need of being brought back under control seeps through many other kinds of texts also: sermons, homilies, journals, letters, ballads and medical textbooks. Indeed, Henderson and McManus suggest that the stereotype of the 'seductress' is the most familiar representation of femininity of the period: 'the image of woman as enticing, sexually insatiable, and deceitful in the service of her lust' (1985, p. 47). The next chapter considers in depth the figure of Frances Howard, whose refusal to accept the shackles of a political marriage led her on a path to become the first woman in English history to successfully sue for a divorce from her husband. Along the way, she would accrue the reputation of a promiscuous woman enjoying the opportunities afforded by the debauched court of King James I, then of a murderess, and of a witch – all concealed beneath the mask of physical attractiveness that saw her hailed as the greatest beauty of her age.

Surface beauty and inner corruption hints at another key characteristic in the construction of the *femme fatale*: her capacity for deceit and a facility to take on different *personae* in order to mask her true intentions, feelings or identity. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, we find the criminologist Otto Pollak noting the fact that 'greater deceitfulness' was inherent in a woman (not just a criminal woman). As evidence, he cited the fact that her physiology made it possible for her to 'practice deceit' when compared to a man, contrasting the male requirement to 'achieve an erection in order to perform the sex act' with the female body, where 'lack of orgasm does not prevent her ability to participate' in sexual activity (1950, pp. 9–10).

The debate about the so-called 'double standard' in relation to male and female sexual behaviour and sexuality in general is a familiar one, although some readers might be surprised to learn that its historical roots run very deep. One (probably pseudonymous) author, Eleanor Sowernam, writing in riposte to a notorious misogynist tract from the early seventeenth century, Joseph Swetnam's *The arraignment of lewde, idle, froward and unconstant women* (1615), complains: 'So in all offenses, those which men commit are made light and as nothing, slighted over, but those which women do commit, those are made grievous and shameful' (cited in Henderson and McManus 1985, pp. 29–30). Even where a writer of this period is apparently defending women, the same ideology underlies their reasoning; so, Christopher Newstead, writing *An apology for women: or women's defence* (1615), confirms that 'woman

was the siren that allured man unto evil' (cited in Aughterson 2005, p. 113). Gowing tells us that before 1600, 'about four times as many women as men came to the court over personal sexual slanders'; in the 40 years immediately following, 'it was nearer six times as many' (1996, p. 65). It is no surprise, then, to find Eve remaining central to this understanding of the dangerous woman. In *The schoolhouse of women* (c. 1541), an early entry in the sixteenth-century European debate often referred to as the *querelle des femmes* (see pp. 61–4), the author is clear that it is Eve who first persuaded Adam to 'transgress':

> Eve him moved first to consent;
> To eat of the apple she did him dress [direct],
> So came all of her willfulness.
> And since that woman that offence began,
> She is more to blame than is the man.
>
> (cited in Henderson and McManus 1985, p. 153)

These two ideas – of woman as temptress and woman as wilful – are familiar themes and the figure of disobedient, deceptive and alluring Eve pervades the culture of the period.

The Victorian *femme fatale:* Fantasy and reality

However, it is in the nineteenth century that the *femme fatale* emerges as a powerfully resonant figure that infuses the culture of the period. The scholarly attention focused on her in this era, particularly from critics working within a range of feminist critical-theoretical positions, has arguably been even more intense than it has been in studies of the *noir* film genre. Jennifer Hedgecock (2008) considers the place of the *femme fatale* in Victorian literature and Bram Dijkstra (1988) looks at both literary and visual arts; both find her to be a signifier of patriarchal anxieties about the rise of the 'new woman' and of wider social and political change. Adriana Craciun (2003) focuses on the first half of the century and considers the connections with debates about gender as culturally or biologically constructed, and Heather Braun (2012) situates her in the culture of the 'long nineteenth century', tracking her rise to ubiquity and eventual clichéd over-familiarity by the beginning of the twentieth century. Elizabeth Menon surveys the representations of dangerous women in popular culture sources such as illustrated journals, literature,

posters and decorative arts, and she considers the transmission of these forms from popular art in the 1860s into the fine art of the *Salon de Paris* paintings (Menon 2006). Mario Praz's classic study of Romanticism, *The Romantic Agony* (first published 1933), provides a definition which is particularly rich in relation to some of the women central in this study:

> In accordance with this conception of the Fatal Woman, the lover is usually a youth, and maintains a passive attitude; he is obscure, and inferior either in condition or in physical exuberance to the woman, who stands in the same relation to him as do the female spider, the praying mantis, & c., to their respective males: sexual cannibalism is her monopoly.
>
> (Praz 1966, p. 231)

Some of the accounts of Frances Howard, Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox work with this exact concept of the male's autonomy subsumed by the will of the female; it raises an associated fear that is very familiar in the history of misogyny, that of the woman challenging patriarchal power and privilege; the *femme fatale* as politically subversive, in the widest sense, is something that I will return to at different points throughout this study.

One of the earliest, frequently referenced fatal women from the Romantic period is the demonic character of Matilda in Matthew Lewis's popular Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796). She is an instrument of Satan who seduces and corrupts the monk Ambrosio, and although he initially rejects her, she proves irresistible and in due course he sleeps with her. She leads Ambrosio deeper and deeper into sinful ways, facilitating the rape and murder of Antonia, another young woman to whom he is drawn. Matilda finally brings about Ambrosio's damnation, playing Mephistopheles to his Faustus. There is a similar dichotomy evident in Shelley's 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery' (1819), which represents the Greek mythological figure as a 'union of opposites', beauty and danger; according to Shelley, it is 'the beauty rather than the horror of the Medusa [that] petrifies the gazer's spirit' (Maxwell 2001, pp. 80, 81). A version of the *femme fatale* also haunted other Romantic poets, in particular Coleridge, in his poem 'Christabel', and Keats, whose 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' ('the beautiful woman without mercy') (1819) fits the archetype most precisely.

The more delicate sensibilities of the later nineteenth century, apparent in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites in literature and the visual arts, often chose to represent the dangerous woman in a more muted

Figure 1.2 Sir Frank Dicksee's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' (c. 1901)

form. Examples include Swinburne's poems 'Dolores' and 'Faustine' (both 1866) and, in the visual arts, versions of John Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' by Sir Frank Dicksee (Figure 1.2) and Edward Burne-Jones; John William Waterhouse portrayed the same figure in 1893, while his paintings *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) and *The Siren* (1900) work with a similar template of a young man tempted to his doom by the enticement of beautiful, usually naked, women. Waterhouse also painted a *Pandora* (1896) and a *Cleopatra* (1888) and a *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891), while Dante Gabriel Rosetti painted and wrote a poem about Lady Lilith (1868), which includes the line 'ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive'. Rebecca Stott (1992) finds rich constructions of the *femme fatale* in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), various works by H. Rider Haggard, Conrad's mysterious women in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and even Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). By the end of the century, according to Dijkstra, the images of the *femme fatale* had come to represent the patriarchy's fear of the new woman movement, and her refusal to remain confined to the domestic space circumscribed for her for so long.[4]

An infamous murder, which led to what became known in Scotland as the trial of the century, offers a potentially illuminating case study

in miniature: the accused murderess, Madeleine Smith (1835–?1928), was a figure of public fascination, and the various representations of her that circulated suggest a number of ways in which such a dangerous woman can resonate in the wider culture.[5] On 23 March 1857, Emile L'Angelier, a 32-year-old native of the island of Jersey who worked as an office clerk in Glasgow, returned to his rented rooms at around 2.30am, complaining to his landlady of terrible stomach pains. Retiring to his bed, he was discovered at nine o'clock that same morning lying dead where he had slept. The cause of death was arsenic poisoning and the trail of suspicion led, via his diary and a collection of letters, to the most unlikely of suspects: not only was Madeleine Hamilton Smith the 21-year-old daughter of a wealthy architect and society man, but she was already engaged to marry William Minnoch, a prosperous merchant and close neighbour of the Smith family. After being questioned about L'Angelier's death on 25 March, and denying everything, Madeleine Smith disappeared the next morning. Minnoch tracked her down – she was fleeing the city and heading for the family's country residence – and he persuaded her to return. Within a week, Smith had been taken into custody. She gave a statement in which she admitted that she had known L'Angelier for about two years, and that they had met 'on a variety of occasions', but that she had not seen him 'for about three weeks before his death' (cited in MacGowan 2007, p. 79). She admitted that they had been in the habit of exchanging 'notes', and that the two of them had made plans to marry. She also described their last meeting, and went on to detail the occasions on which she had recently purchased arsenic, all for cosmetic purposes. She mentioned in her statement that she had planned to speak to him to explain her decision to marry William Minnoch. She denied having poisoned L'Angelier.

The relationship had not been unknown to her family, although the true nature of it came as a considerable shock. It seems that Madeleine Smith's father had already made clear his disapproval of his daughter's associating with a man who was of a considerably lower social status. Nevertheless, the couple had begun to exchange letters in early 1855, and by the summer of that year were referring to one another as if they were already married; they had also by this time entered into a sexual relationship. However, when Smith became engaged to William Minnoch in 1857 she attempted to end the relationship with L'Angelier. He retaliated by threatening to show the letters to her father, the details of which would have incurred perpetual disgrace. Shortly after, L'Angelier was dead.

Smith remained in prison for the three months leading up to her trial, which began on 30 June 1857 in Edinburgh. Her family hired the most celebrated defence lawyers of the time, notably John Inglis, Dean of the Faculty. Evidence and cross-examination led by the Lord Advocate James Moncreiff revealed many suspicious circumstances, including the records of Smith having made three recorded purchases of arsenic from local chemists. Smith claimed that the arsenic had been used either to kill rats, or in heavily diluted form as a cosmetic. In the end, the prosecution was unable to establish an 'unbroken chain' of evidence against her. On 9 July, after only a half hour of deliberation, the jury returned its verdict: 2 believed her guilty, and 13 were undecided; consequently, the charge of murder was found 'Not Proven' – in other words, the jury felt there was insufficient evidence to convict her, although they did not believe the case made by the defence team had proven her innocence either. As the crowds inside and outside the court, where thousands had gathered, gave great cheers, Madeleine Smith slipped out of the building by another door, a free woman.[6]

The murder of Emile L'Angelier comes at a particularly fascinating moment in the history of British crime. According to one London physician, writing in 1849, the crime of arsenic murder had become by the middle of the century 'a *national disgrace*' (cited in Whorton 2010, p. xiii; emphasis in the original). Whorton offers a number of reasons for the poisoning epidemic, including rising poverty (many of the killings were by mothers driven to infanticide, in despair at the number of mouths they had to feed) as well as, interestingly (given the connection to the Ruth Snyder case), the growth of the life insurance industry (pp. 27–30). Judith Knelman writes that 'by the 1840s, when murder by women seemed very prevalent, the press was regularly registering profound shock, contempt, disgust, and dismay at the increasing evidence that women were killing members of their own families for money' (1998, p. 229). The problem was so profound that legislation was passed requiring all sales of arsenic to be recorded in a poison book by apothecaries and pharmacists – a law that gave rise to key evidence in Smith's trial.

One could say that the degree of attention paid to the case was stimulated as much by Madeleine Smith's letters as by the murder itself.[7] Just as sexuality, and more precisely the fusing of sex and violence, is a central theme in the coverage of the Howard, Snyder and Knox trials, so it was with Smith, though heavily veiled by the prudery of Victorian Britain. Smith's letters were read out in court but many were censored or summarised: the Lord Justice-Clerk noted how '[i]n one letter, she

alludes to a most disgusting and revolting scene between them which one would have thought only a common prostitute could have been a party to'. Even more profoundly shocking was the sense of her full complicity in their sexual relationship: 'she talks of the act as hers as much as his', the judge remarked in astonishment (Jesse 1927, p. 295). The Lord Advocate, meanwhile, presenting the case against Smith, deplored the 'depraved moral state of thought and feeling' the letters displayed (Campbell 2007, p. 107). In the same way that the Ruth Snyder case would, 70 years later, touch exposed nerves about women's freedoms in the age of the flapper, the Madeleine Smith letters raised a number of pertinent questions about female sexuality at a time when understandings, ideologies and discourses of the matter were in a considerable state of flux: they are remarkable as a document of one woman's quest for autonomy in a repressive society and in the shadow of an even more authoritarian (weak, jealous) lover.

Mary S. Hartman describes the Smith case as 'perhaps the most sensational in a century of sensational murder trials. [...] For a Victorian public with an already keen appetite for murder', she continues, 'the case had everything: an attractive and socially prominent defendant, illicit sexual adventure, poisoning, and shocking behavior all round' (1973, p. 382). As with Snyder and Knox, the press coverage was extensive. Huge crowds would greet Madeleine Smith's prison carriage as she arrived at the Edinburgh high court. Reporters hung on every word in the courtroom, while artists sketched their (very varied) impressions of the accused murderess for the late editions of the newspapers.

As I will show in due course, the appearance of a woman in court, particularly a woman accused of murder, invites a degree of detailed attention to her dress, her face, her body and her demeanour that finds no equivalent when men are on trial. Many of the accounts of the trial devote considerable space to Madeleine Smith's impact on and presence in the courtroom; this despite the fact she was required to remain silent throughout the proceedings (and in this respect she differs markedly from both Snyder and Knox, where much commentary has been expended on their own statements and replies under cross-examination). There was extensive discussion of her wardrobe choices for her public appearances (and we shall see the same in the Snyder and Knox case studies): Henry Blyth's version of the story has Smith discussing with the prison matron the most appropriate choice of dress. Acknowledging that most of those in court would be male, she is reported to have said, 'I may not be beautiful... but I am conscious of the fact I have a certain allure' (Blyth 1975, p. 134). The *Morning Post*

(2 July 1857, p. 3) provided this detailed description of her arrival on the first day:

> She ascended the stair with a firm step and composed air, and seemed to be in perfect health, her complexion being fresh, and even blooming. [...] Her features express great intelligence and energy of character. Her profile is striking [...] her complexion is soft and fair. Her eyes are large and dark, and full of sensibility.

By contrast, the *Glasgow Courier*'s take on Smith's first appearance in court was a rather sceptical one: the reporter noted her passage from the cab to the courtroom 'with an air of a belle entering a ball-room', and commented on 'the same perpetual smile – or smirk, rather, for it lacks all the elements of a genuine smile' (cited in Campbell 2007, p. 98). Once again, the parallels with Snyder and Knox are remarkable (much would be made of Knox smiling in court, and she would be likened to 'a Hollywood diva sashaying along the red carpet' [*MOL* 19 January 2009 11:45 AM]; see pp. 102, 154–5, 161–2, 185). In another parallel to both women, Smith received many offers of marriage during her imprisonment (Blyth 1975, p. 137).[8] As I will discuss in due course, Knox's odd, often emotionally detached reactions to the death of her friend Meredith Kercher invited suspicion; in Smith's case, Inglis tried to argue that his client's calm demeanour was an indicator of her innocence, not of cold-blooded murderous guilt (Gordon and Nair 2009, p. 138).

Different 'versions' of Madeleine Smith appeared in the years that followed. In early pamphlets such as *The Story of Mimi L'Angelier or Madeleine Hamilton Smith* (1857), she was a morally corrupt fallen woman. For F. Tennyson Jesse, however, writing around the time of Ruth Snyder's crime and execution, Smith was a victim of Victorian middle-class values, and her independence of spirit and her passion were to be commended. Jesse, herself a feminist, believed passionately that Smith had been 'born before her time' (1927, p. 7). In Henry Blyth's *Madeleine Smith: A Famous Victorian Murder Trial* (1975), she appears as highly sexed, devious and manipulative. Reflecting on Minnoch's appearance in court, Blyth wonders whether 'so hesitant a man [could] satisfy the desires of a girl of so strongly sensual a nature' (p. 149). With reference to some of her letters to L'Angelier, Blyth describes her as 'adept at the art of titillation' (p. 89), and speculates that Smith exercised her power over him by holding back from penetrative sex, while allowing 'other intimacies as recompense' such as oral sex (p. 81). The most outlandish of Blyth's many speculative punts is saved for the conclusion: he considers

it both 'possible and indeed probable' that Smith poisoned L'Angelier 'by using an arsenic paste or ointment on her vulva' (p. 196).[9]

There is no doubt that the Madeleine Smith case had a significant impact on the culture. She is mentioned by a number of well-known contemporary writers including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James and George Eliot. In popular literature, the sensation fiction penned by the likes of Wilkie Collins, Mrs Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon often features women driven to desperate or violent acts, frequently with a sexual element providing an additional frisson. Andrew Mangham provides convincing evidence that suggests 'the sensation novelists drew on scandals that were raging through the Victorian age' (2007, p. 5), and it is most likely that the social energy that circulated around and indeed from the Madeleine Smith affair contributed to the popularity of novels such as *The Woman in White* (1860), *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* (both 1862). Lynda Hart notes that the popular depiction of the fallen woman in Victorian literature may well have 'struck terror in the hearts of women, but it also might have provoked more anxiety in the eyes of men' (1994, p. 29), and Mary S. Hartman suggests that high-profile trials like Madeleine Smith's might have provided a 'vicarious outlet' for their frustrations: 'The accused young women had acted out what the female spectators, in their most secret thoughts, had hardly dared to imagine' (1977, p. 84). Once again, the significance of the principles of the crossover between the real and the fictive, and the notion of scripting and self-scripting, come into play. Famous trials were frequently outlined in magazines such as *Temple Bar* and *Cornhill Magazine*, and, as Mangham points out, 'writers of fiction often drew on such non-fictional material to construct stories that had resonances for contemporary readers', while, in a reciprocal process, crime reporters would use literary devices to capture their readers' interest: 'Melodramatic tableaux that one might associate with popular fiction became a useful way to market "factual" crime reports' (2007, p. 5).

However, the key connection between the Smith case and the *femme fatale* meme lies in the debates over her sexual immorality. This places her very directly in a line of discourse that loops back to Frances Howard, and forward through Snyder and Knox. One of the most remarkable aspects of the coverage of the Knox case, as I will show, is the persistence of a value system that condemns her for what is perceived as an unhealthy, immoral promiscuity, capitalising on leaks from her prison diary, information gleaned from social networking sites, and investigative journalism intent on establishing her sexual history – or, at least,

a marketable version of it. In this sense, the representation of Knox is strongly reminiscent of some of the discourse surrounding Howard, Smith and Snyder.

Fifty years later, some of the most enduring images of early cinema drew on the same *femme fatale* meme as that outlined in Menon's study. Theodosia Burr Goodman, the original 'vamp' (notably in *A Fool There Was*, released in 1915), took the screen name Theda Bara, an anagram of 'Arab death' (a stretch for someone born and bred in Ohio). She starred in 39 films in four years, almost all of them variations on the vamp theme, including the title roles in films of *Carmen* (1915), *Cleopatra* (1917) and *Salome* (1918) (Sully 2010, p. 53). In the years preceding the draconian censorship of the Production Code – the crackdown came in July 1934 – the *femme fatale* was one of several powerful female *personae* that dominated the screen. A number of female stars took on Bara's mantle, including Ruth Chatterton, Hedy Lamarr and, most famously, Greta Garbo; the latter would eventually go on strike against MGM chiefly, according to the actor-writer-director Mauritz Stiller advocating her case, because of 'the number of vamp roles which she had been forced to play and which, she keenly feels, are outside her sphere' (cited in LaSalle 2000, p. 47). Perhaps it is inherent in the power of the role of the vamp and the *femme fatale* that actresses playing it subsequently find it difficult to avoid typecasting. It is certainly evidence of another kind of blurring of the real and the imaginary. In this respect, Kathleen Turner (*Body Heat*), Sharon Stone (*Basic Instinct*) and Linda Fiorentino (*The Last Seduction*) are good examples to set alongside Greta Garbo.

The precise starting point for the *noir* genre has been widely debated. As James Naremore wryly notes, 'It has always been easier to recognize a *film noir* than to define the term' (2008, p. 9). Silver and Ward (1992) use 1927 as a starting point, but more purist definitions insist on a more focused period, namely the 1940s and 1950s. In any case, there is no disputing the fact that the *femme fatale* of *film noir* is the most familiar manifestation of the archetype. The figure of the powerful female, in whichever guise she might appear – as vamp, as the new woman, as the flapper of the Prohibition era, as *noir femme fatale* – is ubiquitous in the first half of the twentieth century, and the Ruth Snyder case study finds a natural place in this period of social upheaval. Susan Bordo observes that 'during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially' there tends to be a spike in the representation of 'the dark, dangerous, and evil female' (cited in Grossman 2009, p. 97), and this applies for each of the periods under scrutiny.

Female criminality

One of the toughest challenges this project faces is the integration of analysis of representations of 'real life' dangerous women – Frances Howard, Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox – and the cultural constructions in such forms as theatre, fiction, visual art and film of the *femme fatale* meme within which, I argue, they are inevitably bound up. The claim that this cyclical action of the fictive informing the real, and the real informing the fictive, exists is not an unfamiliar idea. Janey Place puts it neatly when she observes: 'Our popular culture functions as myth for our society: it both expresses and reproduces the ideologies necessary to the existence of the social structure' (1980, p. 47). The beliefs, values, political notions and material social relations of a society all inform and, in turn, are informed *by* its individual members. As a part of these cycles of mutual interaction and change, cultural forms – for instance, popular film or popular theatre – will be shaped by those ideologies and will in turn contribute to them, helping to mould the representations by which people make sense of themselves, their fellow human beings, and the world around them. Thus, just as we can see certain preconceptions about female character and behaviour informing the culture of the period, so we can see how the gender ideology of a particular era might inform perceptions of these women.

This process is readily apparent in the way society represents and interprets those who violate the laws by which that society chooses to live. 'Deviant' behaviour mobilises certain attitudes and assumptions; media representations are inevitably shaped by these assumptions, and the more shocking the crimes of which these individuals stand accused, the more vivid the reaction. According to D'Cruze and Jackson, 'Whilst the normative stereotype of "the criminal" has been gendered as masculine, women have been associated with specific types of transgression that have led to moments of heightened anxiety at different points in time.' They instance witchcraft, prostitution and infanticide, noting how all three were 'primarily associated with [...] women's sexual and reproductive functions' (2009, p. 2). As so often, the preoccupation with female anatomy and physiology reveals more deeply seated suspicions and fears about the moral nature of women.

Weatherby et al., commenting on representations of violent women on trial, remark: 'As soon as the crime is committed, the media immediately acts on the public sense of anomie [confusion] and classifies the female murderer as either mad or bad' (or, one might add, both) (2008). Similarly, Hilary Neroni describes the media response to a violent

woman as, in a precise sense, *hysterical*; as she defines the term, 'a neurotic reaction in which the subject constantly questions the desire and position of the Other'. She continues: 'In the manner of the hysteric, the media asks again and again what the violent woman wants, while it also speculates endlessly about the definition of femininity' (2005, p. 60). Violent male offenders are understood to be conforming to well established patterns of behaviour, even if their crimes provoke feelings of anger, horror and revulsion. Agents of female violence are, by contrast, 'doubly deviant, doubly damned' (Lloyd 1995), having both broken the law and transgressed the 'rules' of what is understood to be acceptable female behaviour. As Keitner argues, for women, 'being "normal" means conforming to traditional notions of femininity. Those who do not conform are inherently suspect; their crimes only confirm their deviance, and the threat they pose, to the patriarchy' (2002, p. 55). These women all have at least one element in common, and that is their determination to pursue a particular course of action: as Julie Grossman would have it, in her reappraisal of the *femme fatale*, 'It is the leading female's commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be [...] at any cost, that makes her the cynosure, the compelling point of interest for men and women.' Grossman suggests it is the 'dialog between their perversity [by society's conventional standards] and their power' which makes them so fascinating (2009, p. 3). What is most striking about a parallel reading of cases such as those of Frances Howard, Madeleine Smith, Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox are the multiple, insistent and repetitive voices echoing horrified fascination, titillation, stern reproach and damning judgement down through the centuries.

Prejudices about crime (particularly violent crime) in relation to masculinity and femininity have informed much of the coverage of the murder of Meredith Kercher. Criminologists have long acknowledged the significance of cultural constructions and understandings of femininity when analysing the treatment (by the justice system) and representation (by the media) of female criminals. Commonly understood to be more emotional, intuitive and gentler than men, other mitigating factors – often to do with health and especially mental health (sometimes with reference to pre-menstrual syndrome and post-natal depression) – are also more likely to come under review when dealing with women. Furthermore, maternal feelings are likely to figure far more prominently than paternal ones in terms of mitigation of crimes committed by men. Correspondingly, women are likely to draw much higher levels of opprobrium in crimes involving children such as paedophilia and infanticide, as cases such as those of Myra Hindley ('still [regarded as]

the embodiment of all that is unnatural in women' [Kennedy 2005, p. 253]), and more recently Maxine Carr and Vanessa George (the latter convicted of child abuse in 2009) illustrate. Carr, though convicted only of perverting the course of justice and aiding an offender, was vilified on a level commensurate with that of her lover Ian Huntley, who abducted and murdered the ten-year-old girls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Cambridgeshire, UK, in 2002.

The implications of gendered approaches to understanding female criminality are complex. Defining women by their biology is, as Ann Lloyd points out, to assert the male psyche and behaviour as the norms, and the female as a deviation from it (1995, p. xvii), thus replicating many centuries of psychology (and, for that matter, philosophy and theology) dictated by patriarchal thinking. Helena Kennedy writes: 'Pathologising women is a way of perpetuating the myth that they are victims of their own physiology and that the function of all women might be intrinsically impaired' (2005, p. 20). However, it is no surprise that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criminologists who struggled to come to terms with the disturbing category of the violent woman relied heavily on physiological rationales. Hargrave L. Adam's *Woman and Crime* (1914) posited that 'something malign [must have] happened at their begetting which sets them apart from ordinary human beings' (cited in Kennedy 2005, p. 16), and in Lombroso and Ferrero's famed study *The Female Offender* (1895), the Italian proto-criminologists argued that 'female criminals approximate more to males [...] than to normal women' in terms of aspects of their physiology and phrenology (p. 28). This kind of discourse is apparent in the coverage of the Ruth Snyder case. Furthermore, the vexed debate about 'essential' feminine qualities, values and weaknesses re-emerges, with a vengeance, in media coverage and online discussion of Amanda Knox's involvement in the murder of Meredith Kercher.

In her 2002 study of gender bias in capital punishment, Chimène I. Keitner suggests that the justices involved in assessing the guilt or innocence of the woman who constituted one of her case studies 'endeavoured to create what was, for them, a logically cohesive account of the incident in accordance with their understandings of human behavior'. That account, in Keitner's estimation, undoubtedly 'illustrates the ways in which stereotypes shape, and may distort, interpretations of violence by women' (2002, p. 53). Ruth Snyder, for instance, found her own narrative of the events leading up to her husband's death in competition with other 'scripts', alternative versions of the story. This is, naturally, a familiar feature of any trial based on the adversarial system

of criminal procedure, where defence and prosecution put their opposing cases before the jury, presided over by a judge (Knox, by contrast, was tried by an inquisitorial system, in which a judge calls up evidence, witnesses and expert testimony). However, the sense of multiple, conflicting stories was greatly intensified in both cases by the media attention the two women attracted. For Snyder, the heightened sense of theatre that was erected like a proscenium arch around the whole trial turned her ordeal to into a kind of performance; as I will show, much of the reportage is suffused with theatrical language.

As was the case with Madeleine Smith and Ruth Snyder before her, Knox's behaviour in court was minutely scrutinized, with a consequent cycle of action and reaction spiralling increasingly out of control, as warring factions attempted to 'spin' her character in opposing directions. A key element of the parallel study will be the representation of each woman's 'performance' in court and other public appearances. It is at these moments that the dilemma of being/playing themselves versus the performance and interpretation of *personae* is seen and felt most acutely by the women themselves.

The mask of beauty

In a post-Foucauldian world, the idea of the stable, autonomous self is regarded with deep suspicion. There is no essence, we are told. Instead, we are invited to understand ourselves as inescapably subject to discourse, to ideology, always in flux, always in process. It could be said that this conceptualisation of the self is particularly relevant to those who have historically been disempowered by the structures of society within which they have subsisted. It may be that, as Althusser would have it, our sense of self is constructed by the process of being interpolated as subjects by ideology; 'hailed' in a certain fashion, the subject responds and so internalises the way in which she has been greeted. Perhaps, as Lacan argues, the subject is constituted in language. Or perhaps Foucault is closer to the truth when he proposes that it is cultural, disciplinary practices that constitute the self. In any case, these are understandings of the self that are, to all intents and purposes, passive, although Foucault's later writings perhaps offer the possibility of a kind of agency, 'where the experience of the self is not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one's available freedom' (Foucault 1997, p. 276). In the case studies that follow, the tension between a self that is constructed by ideology on the one hand, and an identity that may

be autonomous and self-determined on the other, is crucial. This study explores the identities of three women, hundreds of years apart, but each under the scrutiny of the public eye and so subject to intense ideological pressures. The theme of identity and autonomy in relation to those pressures is threaded through the case study chapters, and I will return to it in the book's conclusion (see pp. 188–99).

Such ideological 'shaping' can be traced in a number of different ways. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger anticipates a key strand in feminist film theory when he suggests that '*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (1972, p. 47). Berger's formulation is probably more familiar today via Laura Mulvey's much-anthologised essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', written in 1973 and published in 1975. Mulvey's critique of mainstream Hollywood film is centred around her contention that the 'look' in cinema is inherently male because the camera is controlled by men, and aimed at women, who are framed as objects of the gaze. Since Berger and Mulvey first proposed these ideas, the theory of the male gaze has been challenged on a number of counts (chiefly for the assumptions that the viewer is always [a] passive and [b] heterosexual), but it has also found a place in interpretations of society at large, becoming a central tenet in the understanding of the ways in which, often unconsciously, popular culture and the media incorporate the perspective of the dominant male order. Berger also notes how woman is not only the *surveyed* but also the *surveyor* because 'how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another' (1972, p. 46) – that 'other' invariably male. This understanding of woman as being 'split into two', continually forced to observe herself in attempts to regulate her behaviour and appearance, connects directly with the notion of performance I have just invoked. It is apparent that, in the dazzle of the media's glare, both Snyder and Knox repeatedly caught their reflections, glimpses of themselves – or versions of themselves – that sometimes flattered, sometimes horrified, and almost always confounded them. We see in both a process of recoil, retreat, reassessment and recalibration. It is Berger's process in motion: 'The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female', he writes; 'Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight' (1972, p. 47).

The media undoubtedly train powerful spotlights on women tried and/or convicted of violent crime, particularly murder, and their physical appearance is almost always a major preoccupation. Marsh

and Melville offer three short case studies, comparing the media representation of Karla Homolka ('male investigators and reporters were mesmerized by [her]'), Tracie Andrews (the tabloids repeatedly cited her former career as a model) and Rose West (the media 'focused on [her] "frumpy" appearance' to the exclusion of her actual crimes) (Marsh and Melville 2009, pp. 79–81).[10] In each case, whether for the degree to which the woman in question conformed to conventional notions of beauty, or for the extent to which she deviated from it, the press focused obsessively on the way they presented themselves in court, and, where possible, sought out photographs of the women dating from before their arrests. In a similar vein, the picture taken of Myra Hindley (Figure 1.3) on her arrest in 1966 – she would later be convicted for assisting her lover Ian Brady in the torture and murder of five children – has taken on

Figure 1.3 Myra Hindley, 1966

an iconic status in the history of crime. In respect of their appearance, women accused of murder are scrutinised and judged in a way and on a scale that does not remotely apply to their male counterparts.

As the case studies make abundantly clear in the chapters that follow, the preoccupation with these women's physical appearance is consistent and insistent. Frances Howard was reputed to be one of the great beauties of her age; David Lindley begins his book with a fascinating analysis of the commentary that the William Larkin portrait has provoked (Figure 1.4): references to 'Lady Somerset's unabashed sexuality and menacing gaze'; descriptions of 'an amused sensuality lurk[ing] about her mouth' and a 'coldly appraising stare'. Lindley reminds us: 'At one level the projection of lustful purpose into this image of Frances Howard is uncomfortably close to the way in which in our society it is still possible for a rapist to plead that a girl's short skirt might be taken as a mitigation of his crime.' Furthermore, we must also always be aware of

Figure 1.4 Portrait of Frances Howard, Countess of Somerset, c. 1615, attributed to W. Larkin

the significance of context: a little more research reveals that Frances's choice of a very low-cut dress actually tells us nothing besides the fact that it was a fashion that was very much in vogue at the time (Lindley 1993, pp. 6–7).

Lindley's remarks on how the portrait of Frances Howard has been viewed and interpreted, however, illuminate another facet of looking and to-be-looked-at-ness (as Mulvey puts it). References to Frances's 'menacing gaze' and 'coldly appraising stare' remind us that the female may not always be the object, and that, when they engage as agents of the gaze, the impact can be profound, precisely because it is so unconventional. In this respect, the idea of the woman as agent rather than object of the gaze recalls the figure of Medusa, whose glance turned men to stone. I have explored above (see pp. 22–3) the most familiar version of the Gorgon as she appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Other accounts, intriguingly, offer slightly different perspectives. For example, the Roman historian Diodorus Siculus puts the Gorgons on a par with that more familiar embodiment of ancient female power, the Amazons, and portrays them as vying with each other for domination. Both races, he notes, were later 'utterly extirpated by Hercules'; predictably, it appears to have been 'a thing intolerable to him [...] to suffer any nation to be governed any longer by women' (cited in Garber and Vickers 2003, p. 29): hence his decision to wipe them off the face of the earth. The ambivalent qualities of Medusa are emphasised in Lucian's account, written about 150 years after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In his version, it was not a terrifying face that turned men to stone, but the *beauty* of the Gorgon that 'stunned its beholders and made them speechless'; Greek geographer Pausanias, also writing in the second century AD, took a similar approach when he described Perseus cutting off the head of Libyan warrior queen Medusa because of the depth of his admiration for her beauty (both cited in Garber and Vickers 2003, pp. 43, 45). Whatever the case may be, whether inspiring awe or fear, what is common in every figuration of Medusa is the power of the female gaze: as a challenge to and reversal of the much more familiar Berger/Mulvey conceptualisation, it has considerable subversive potential.

It is a familiar cliché that the eyes are the windows to the soul, and much of the discussion of Knox's appearance in relation to her guilt seems to have been predicated on that assumption. An essay by Ian Leslie for the *Guardian*, 'Amanda Knox: What's in a face?' (8 October 2011), unpicked the flawed thinking that encourages us to indulge in the ancient, discredited art of physiognomy. In following some of the online debate over the Knox case on sites such as the discussion forum

perugiamurderfile.org, I repeatedly came across posts that fixated on Knox's eyes, with contributors to the forum describing them as icy, dead, wild or crazy, sometimes posting pictures that seemed to support their suppositions. Often Knox would have been caught with her head tilted down, peering from beneath a rather heavy brow, as one might be inclined to when caught in the glare of press photographers' flash bulbs (I will return to a consideration of Knox and the gaze of the *femme fatale* in her case study chapter – see pp. 150–4). The upshot is sometimes, undeniably, an impression of deviousness. The Italian media coined a phrase that resonates precisely with the ambivalence of Medusa when they described Knox as the 'angel with a devil's face', a phrase that captured the imagination of many commentators around the world. British reporters swiftly followed suit, finding it almost impossible to resist the compulsion to refer to the angel/devil binary in their coverage of the case. 'She is a wide-eyed innocent, a normal, high-spirited, all-American college student', begins one London *Times* report, and in the following paragraph flips the coin: 'She is a she-devil, manipulative, unscrupulous, a born actress and a liar, a killer whose angelic face is betrayed by her ice-blue eyes' (*Times* 5 December 2009). For many reporters and followers of the case, Knox was 'a strange but fascinating mixture of femme fatale and fresh-faced innocent' (*Times* 19 January 2010).

Madeleine Smith was a young middle-class woman repeatedly described in accounts of the L'Angelier murder as a society beauty. One would have to say that the court artists' takes on this point were variable (Figure 1.5), but a number of reporters recorded their impressions in striking terms: one noted, 'Her smile was ravishing [...] I was compelled again and again to look upon her, so magnetic were her eyes. Her demeanour was both proud and unafraid [...] I observed many gentlemen near me fascinated by her to the point of open admiration' (cited in Blyth 1975, p. 139). The model here is not so far away from the sensation fiction of the period, and its mysterious, often dangerous women. Seventy years later, Ruth Snyder was the 'comely blonde' (*NYDN* 2 April 1927, p. 3) whose eyes transfixed many observers; reporters were preoccupied with her supposed magnetism and her commanding physical presence in the courtroom (see pp. 101–2).

The iconic status of the Medusa makes her a useful reference point in the argument that follows. The power of myth is in the insight it embodies that goes deeper than literal, historical truth. Myth can also transcend historical boundaries, providing the kind of deep focus that allows us to keep the past and present in view simultaneously. As I trace each of my case studies, the distinctions between fact and fiction will

Figure 1.5 Court artists' impressions of Madeleine Smith 1857

blur and dissolve. So, too, at times, will the chronological distances concertina: Howard, Snyder and Knox may be vastly different in terms of their backgrounds and contexts, their characters, and the crimes they were accused of committing, but they share so much common ground that an unattributed description might sometimes be difficult to place with certainty. Thus, when we read:

> The story [...] was turned into a fantastic, sordid sex scandal. The murder itself was brutal. It seemed that from the moment the detectives reached [the crime scene], there was the general belief that [she] had committed or had been the motivating force behind this brutal crime. The idea of a woman planning and committing such brutal and violent acts was only possible after the detectives, press, lawyers, and the media quickly turned into her into a promiscuous, cold-hearted [...] monster. [...] No-one could satiate her appetite for sex, drinking, smoking, and dancing.

...we might wonder who the subject could be. The account actually comes courtesy of Hilary Neroni (2005, p. 67), and concerns Ruth Snyder, although it could just as easily be applied to Knox. A beautiful woman accused of a violent crime, time and again, is swiftly configured as a *femme fatale* by a society profoundly disturbed by the potential threat she poses to ideologies of gender and power. They invariably cast around for narratives in which those women can be fixed and contained. What follows is an attempt to trace these women's stories, and their intertexts – the novels, plays, movies and TV episodes that have drawn upon the coverage of their trials, however indirectly. The focus is on how these intertexts in turn have formed new angles, vertices and faces in the evolving idea of the *femme fatale*, the lethal woman who, as beautiful and terrifying as Medusa, continues to haunt the unconscious of the patriarchy.

2
Frances Howard (1590–1632)

> If the devil / Did ever take good shape, behold his picture.
>
> *The White Devil*, 3.2.216–17

The bride's still waiting at the altar: Two marriages

On 26 December 1613, a wedding took place in the Chapel Royal in Whitehall. Lavishly staged, the celebrations went on for several days. Among those contributing masques and poems in honour of the happy couple were John Donne, Thomas Campion, George Chapman and Ben Jonson. The union had been a long time coming: Frances Howard,[1] Countess of Somerset, made her vows with Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester, in the same place where, almost exactly eight years earlier, on 5 January 1606, she had married her first husband, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, when she had been just 15 years old, and he 14.

This first match had been a poor one. Although it had been carefully planned in political terms, uniting two powerful aristocratic families, the marriage had unravelled in unseemly fashion. Having spent the first three years apart, Frances residing at court while Devereux travelled in Europe and completed his education, their reunion did not go smoothly, despite much expectation at the court of King James I. Although it is impossible to determine the precise nature of the problem, the evidence suggests that Frances Howard and Robert Devereux's attempts to consummate their marriage were unsuccessful. David Lindley notes contemporary references that suggest Devereux might have been impotent. In any case, it also appears that by this time Frances had fallen in love with the Scot Robert Carr, who had risen rapidly in King James I's court to become the king's most treasured favourite (for which one

can read 'lover'): from humble beginnings, he had been knighted in 1607, created Viscount Rochester in 1611 and would become Earl of Somerset in November 1613. The political wheels were set in motion to arrange an annulment of the marriage between Frances Howard and Robert Devereux in order to clear the way for a union between Frances and Robert Carr.

It should come as no surprise that there was much more to the engineering of the match between these two than mere romantic love. Dynastic thinking had underpinned Frances's marriage to Devereux, and now that a divorce was being sought to allow her to marry the increasingly powerful Rochester, political manoeuvring inevitably played a part here too, as the delicate negotiations proceeded. However, in order to annul the marriage, it was necessary to prove that it had never been consummated in the first place. As part of the investigation, Frances was subjected to a physical examination conducted by two midwives and four matrons, who concluded that she was indeed still a virgin. The king intervened personally in order to try to facilitate the annulment, leaning heavily on some of the bishops involved in making a judgement on the case. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, tried to stand firm against the annulment, James escalated to more direct threats. However, there was a significant degree of unease over the annulment and Frances's intention to marry Carr. As Jeanne Addison Roberts points out, even the poems written by Donne, Jonson, Chapman and Campion to celebrate her second marriage have ambiguous undertones that hint at fertility and barrenness, rumour and gossip (1998, pp. 165–6). Among those opposed to the union between Howard and Carr was a friend of Carr's, Sir Thomas Overbury. Overbury had cultivated the friendship with Carr at least in part to improve his own position and prospects at court (he had been knighted in June 1608); indeed, as Carr had cemented his position in King James's court, Overbury had been a driving intellectual force behind him, with Carr effectively functioning as a mouthpiece for the older man. However, there was undoubtedly also genuine affection between them. Beatrice White suggests that the relationship was probably also an emotional and sexual one, something that was not unusual at this time (1965, p. 8). However, it would appear that the match between Carr and Frances did not suit Overbury's agenda, even though he had been instrumental in facilitating the affair in the first place. Indeed, so vigorous was Overbury in his condemnation of it, and so insulting towards Frances in particular, that Carr was compelled to have him removed from court in order to put an end to his meddling. When Overbury refused the foreign post

that would have facilitated his removal, he was accused of disobeying a direct order from the king himself, and on 21 April 1613 he was arrested and placed in the Tower of London on a charge of treason. Five months later, on 25 September, the commissioners examining the evidence in the Devereux/Howard case declared the marriage could legitimately be annulled, although the margin was slim: seven voting for the annulment, and five against. By then, Overbury had already been dead for ten days.

The official verdict on Overbury's death was natural causes. It was not until two years later that rumours began to whisper down the corridors of the court concerning the true circumstances of his death. Stories of covert communications, betrayal and poisonings. And at the centre of those rumours stood the figure of Frances Howard herself.

You will not die, it is not poison: The death of Sir Thomas Overbury

Much conjecture still surrounds the precise circumstances of Overbury's death. The time lapse of a couple of years between his demise and the opening of an enquiry into its circumstances clouds the issues quite significantly, and it is not even clear how the rumours that his death might have been suspicious began to surface. It is significant, however, that by this time Robert Carr had fallen from his favoured position in the king's circle, supplanted by Sir George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, of whom James famously said, 'Christ had his John, and I have my George', referencing the disciple whom, the Bible tells us, Jesus loved the most (John 13:23). Villiers would retain a (much abused) position of power beyond the death of King James and into the reign of his son King Charles, who was also under Villiers' sway, before being assassinated in 1628, three years into Charles's reign. Carr's bitterness at having been replaced in the monarch's affections led to behaviour so obnoxious that he soon alienated James, who appears to have been remarkably patient before finally abandoning hope of any kind of reconciliation. From this point on, Carr was rendered vulnerable to politically motivated attacks from other quarters.

As unease about Overbury's death mounted, Edward Coke, a cross-bred bloodhound-Rottweiler of a Lord Chief Justice, began to collect evidence and round up suspects and witnesses, the most significant arrests being those of Richard Weston (Overbury's keeper in the Tower of London), Sir Gervais Elwes (Lieutenant of the Tower), a young apothecary named James Franklin, and Anne Turner; the latter was the widow of a respected London physician, George Turner, an acquaintance of the

astrologer Simon Forman (of whom more later), and a companion of Frances. Weston's confession implicated Frances, too, and it did not take long for Robert Carr himself to fall under suspicion.

Recent historians of the case disagree about the extent of Frances and her husband's involvement. Beatrice White is convinced that Frances, '[o]bsessed by the passion she felt for [Carr], [...] could brook no frustration and was impelled to secure her personal happiness by the most iniquitous methods' (1965, p. 58). The supposition at a stroke establishes a particular construction of Frances's character (obsessive, selfish, manipulative), and that interpretation is embellished by White's insistence that Frances enlisted the widow Anne Turner and the prison keeper Richard Weston (a former servant of Turner's) to administer poison to Overbury: Elwes gave evidence that a phial was passed to Weston to mix into Overbury's food, and that he had foiled the assassination when he had intercepted it. According to Elwes, he then instructed Weston to inform Howard and Turner that the deed had been done, and to describe the effects of the poison on the supposed victim. Elwes would use this as a cornerstone of his defence – that he had allowed the traffic between Howard and the Tower, but that he had monitored it and intercepted it as necessary. However, it would not save him from the gallows. On 17 October 1615, the Somersets were put under house arrest, and on 2 November Carr was committed to the Tower of London. Frances remained under house arrest in Blackfriars while she awaited the birth of her child: Anne Carr was born on 9 December 1615, and Frances was confined to the Tower in March 1616. Having begged not to be lodged in the rooms previously occupied by Overbury, she was installed in the quarters just vacated by Sir Walter Raleigh instead.

Prior to Frances's and Carr's appearances in court, Weston and Anne Turner were both tried, the former with a trial beginning on 19 October and the latter a month later on 17 November. Weston refused to plead, which threw the process into some confusion: if Weston did not submit to the authority of the court, he could not be tried; furthermore, Edward Coke was relying on a guilty verdict as it would allow him to pursue those he believed to be accessories (including Elwes, Carr and Frances). In the end, he ruled that the case should proceed without Weston's offer of a plea, and Weston was convicted of murder on 23 October and hanged two days later, having given away nothing that would incriminate Frances or Robert Carr. Anne Turner was similarly uncooperative under pressure both prior to and during her trial. Coke's attack on her in court was devastating, declaring that she embodied the seven deadly sins: she was 'a whore, a bawd, a sorcerer, a witch, a papist, a felon

and a murderer, the daughter of the devil Forman' (Cobbett cited in Somerset 1997, p. 327). Turner went to the gallows on 14 November, and her contrite attitude, her pleas for forgiveness and her request that she should be allowed to pray for Frances all contributed to the sense of her as the archetypal evil woman who had acknowledged the errors of her ways and turned her back on sin as she went to meet her Maker. Elwes, meanwhile, having defended himself vigorously, was trumped by Coke's presentation of a confession from the apothecary James Franklin which implicated not only Elwes but Frances and Robert Carr also. Elwes was found guilty and died a dignified death on 29 November, spared the ignominy of public execution at Tyburn and instead hanged from a gallows inside the walls of the Tower of London. Franklin's gushing confessions failed to buy him mercy, and he followed a week later. At the beginning of the new year, it would be Frances's turn to face her accusers. In due course, I will examine her court appearance in more detail. For now, it is enough to note that, having pleaded guilty, Frances was condemned to death, and Robert Carr followed, subject to the same verdict and sentence, shortly after. However, pardons for both came in due course: Frances's in July 1616, but Carr's not until October 1624, only months before the king's death, although it had become clear soon after the trial that the death sentence would not be carried out. In January 1622, they were both released from the Tower, although their movements remained monitored and regulated.

Reports suggest that the relationship between Frances and Robert Carr never recovered from the drama of the Overbury trials. In his prologue to the docu-drama of the annulment, *The True Tragicomedy* (c. 1655), Francis Osborne reports: 'She lived after her enlargement long under the same roof with Somerset, yet unconcerned as a wife, he looking upon her as the author of her fall' (Potter 1983, p. 11). They had no more children (it is possible that the birth of their first child had left Frances incapable of bearing any more), and there were rumours of Frances's infidelity. The modern historian Anne Somerset, apparently working with the paradigm of Frances as a woman unable to control her sexual appetites, thinks there can have been few opportunities for affairs considering her close supervision in the Tower, 'but perhaps she seized whatever chance she could' (Somerset 1997, p. 434). The seventeenth-century antiquarian Simonds D'Ewes, on the other hand, believed that some divine providence had punished Frances for her sins, rendering her 'disabled' in sexual performance in such a way that, 'though she lived near upon twenty years after it, yet her husband the Earl of Somerset never knew her' (cited in Somerset 1997, p. 439).

Ten thousand talkers: The circulation of the Overbury scandal

Before I look in more detail at the figure of Frances Howard and the scandals that engulfed her, it is important to secure a clearer sense of the way the story, as news, might have developed. We are a considerable distance from the 24/7 news culture that is the context for the Amanda Knox case, of course, but we are also a long way from the tabloid news that kept Ruth Snyder in the headlines daily, sometimes several times a day, in the early twentieth century, or from Scotland's 'trial of the century' and Madeleine Smith's appearances at the High Court in Edinburgh in 1857. Nevertheless, so far as we can discern, the unfolding events in the annulment of the marriage between Frances and the Earl of Essex and then in the death of Sir Thomas Overbury were not confined to the corridors of the palace at Whitehall. Alastair Bellany's *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England* (2002) offers a fascinating and very detailed account of the ways in which news circulated in England in the early seventeenth century (the references in the following paragraphs are all to his account unless otherwise noted), and he identifies three key means: oral accounts, correspondence and newsletters and libels. Although it is not part of Bellany's brief and he does not mention it, I intend to cast a wider net in coming to an understanding of the impact of the Frances Howard case in its own time, and the larger part of this chapter will, in keeping with the scope of the book and its other case studies, consider her in relation to the broader circulation of ideas in the culture of the time. In the case of Frances Howard, that context is one of the most significant and volatile arenas for the generation, exchange and contestation of ideas and ideologies: the public playhouse.

Bellany notes that no transcripts of court proceedings were made at this point in English history, and it is worth bearing this in mind when assessing the reliability of the reports that filtered through to the general public. Nevertheless, as he points out, oral accounts were the primary means by which news circulated, presumably informed by those attending court sessions of the trials, and witnessing the executions where the confessions and final speeches of the condemned usually formed a major part of the ritual. Bellany quotes Ben Jonson's play *The Staple of News* (1625), where the main areas for the swapping of news stories in London are identified as the Court (chiefly the palaces at Whitehall), Paul's Walk ('a meeting place of courtiers, merchants and gentlemen who assembled at certain hours to talk business and politics') and the

Exchange ('where the City's merchants assembled and the fashionable went to shop') (pp. 81–2). Having examined the evidence in exhaustive detail, Bellany is quite certain of the impact of the Overbury affair, and that it was 'undoubtedly a topic of constant conversation in Paul's and on the Exchanges, in the taverns and in the ordinaries [eating houses]' (p. 83).

The second way news was transmitted was by letters, either in personal correspondence, or in the more professional form of documents prepared by so-called intelligencers, working often in a paid capacity to inform members of the aristocracy and gentry outside the immediate orbit of London society (pp. 86–7). Related to the newsletters were 'separates', accounts (e.g., of trial reports) that could be copied out and circulated, either on single sheets or in more elaborate improvised booklets (pp. 89–90). Bellany suggests that these were probably circulated in the London news hubs I have already mentioned (p. 93). Documents produced in this way from the Overbury affair even included copies of letters written by Frances to Anne Turner and Simon Forman (p. 95).

Finally, poems, often satirical, known as libels, were written by wits (usually anonymously) in response to such events as the Overbury scandal: Bellany estimates 25 were written about Frances and Robert Carr, in relation to either the divorce or the murder (p. 97). Most often, as in my other case studies, it was the woman who was the focus of the attacks. One popular anagram – authors of libels were fond of acrostics and other verbal puzzles – read, 'Francis Howarde – Car finds a whore' (p. 106). Bellany points out how these libels were responsive to status updates too: one popular quatrain, first circulated around 1613–14, described Frances as 'A maid, a wife, a Countess and a whore'; in a later version, around 1615–16, she becomes 'A wife, a witch, a murderer, and a whore' (p. 98). Another puns obscenely on Carr's surname, and is typically misogynist:

> There was a court lady of late
> That none could enter she was so strait
> But now with use she is grown so wide
> There is a passage for a Carr to ride.
>
> (LeComte 1969, p. 133)

Furthermore, the libels would often circulate outside London, either transmitted orally (if they were relatively short), copied into newsletters,

or else carried out by travellers or sent out to other regions of the country. It is important not to underestimate the significance of these libels, which were wielded as (perhaps, to us) surprisingly powerful weapons in all kinds of political and familial conflicts. Joshua Eckhardt elaborates a thesis that the act of collecting and circulating the Somerset libels had a particular, overt intention: that of resisting the growth of a perceived crypto-Catholic threat in the form of Frances Howard, who was from a Catholic noble family and had divorced her Protestant husband; Robert Carr, meanwhile, was promoting the idea of a marriage between Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta, and was therefore subject to similar suspicions (Eckhardt 2006, p. 66). Libels were also rather volatile weapons, with the potential to explode in the trigger-hand; laws of defamation meant that a libeller could face a stiff penalty if pursued by a target of the satire and found guilty (Bellany 2002, p. 113).

Bellany recounts that the Overbury affair was widely discussed in all these fora but also notes that it 'became a print sensation of unusual proportions', with 17 publications about the events appearing at the end of 1615 and the beginning of 1616 (pp. 114–15). Although it is still difficult to be certain about the extent to which the news circulated among the general populace, one incident noted by Chamberlain gives an indication of public feeling about Frances in the wake of the Overbury trials. After hearing of her sentencing, White notes that the 'common people' had gathered several times on Tower Hill in hope of an execution, only to be disappointed. They so resented her pardon that 'they attacked a coach in which the Queen and other ladies had come privately to town, under the impression that it contained the Countess and her mother' (Chamberlain cited in White 1965, p. 177). For a woman who had once been eulogised as a court beauty and who had successfully petitioned for an annulment of an unsatisfactory marriage in order to form an alliance with one of the most powerful men in England, it had been a precipitous fall.

Shifting our attention from the immediate historical context to the ensuing decades, it is necessary to approach the first extensive accounts of the Howard affair with some caution. The stories that have grown up around her were undoubtedly influenced by the competing agendas of those who rehearsed her history in the years after her death. As England headed for civil war between Royalists and Parliamentarians, the scandals that defined Frances's life would prove excellent fodder for anti-Stuart propaganda, bent on portraying a court corrupted by greed, lust and excess: Arthur Wilson's *History of Great Britain* (1653) and Anthony Weldon's *Court and Character of King James* (1650) are the

most obvious examples, and the two which provide the most detailed accounts of the events. Less well known, but an antiquarian with some particular insights on the case, is Simonds D'Ewes, a political moderate who shifted to the Parliamentarian side. The partisan nature of much of this writing is epitomised by Wilson's gloating, gruesome account of Howard's death, most likely from cancer of the uterus (see pp. 90–1, below). As I will show, Frances, in life as in death, was easily fashioned by those observing and later documenting her progress into the familiar stereotypes of female transgressors that were so familiar at that time. A number of historians including William Sanderson refer to rumours of Howard having had an affair with King James's son Prince Henry, a youth much loved by the public at large.[2]

In fact, precious little direct evidence of Frances's character and behaviour has survived, although we do have a couple of letters that were read out at the Overbury murder trials, one to Anne Turner expressing her distress at the idea of having to lie with Devereux, and at the prospect of losing Carr's love if she did; the other was to Forman, expressing the same fears and appealing for his help. As David Lindley says, the letter to Turner 'suggests that she was far from the sexually experienced whore of common fantasy' (1993, p. 73). Nevertheless, the negative constructions of Frances Howard begin early in the accounts of her life. She was a notable victim of the element of biographical writing that Lindley describes as 'back-formation' – that is to say, an attempt 'to derive from later, more fully documented events a psychology of character which can provide the narrative impulse for the story as a whole' (p. 44), a process we can identify as being at work in the constructions of all of the women in this study.[3] Lindley points out that the murder of Overbury was 'imported back into the reading of the divorce' in later years, 'which then becomes a sign of Frances Howard's essential moral turpitude' (p. 78). In the stories that circulated, she would, inexorably, be moulded into the shape of the seductive, dangerous woman.

Just like a woman: Early modern representations of femininity

If, at certain points in history, the *femme fatale* meme tends to take on a greater significance and prominence, then England at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries certainly lays a strong claim to being one of the most significant of those historical moments. Many scholars have remarked upon the change in the cultural climate at this time, and have surveyed the way in which misogyny

informs the discourse in several different contexts. Jacqueline Eales notes that writings about women in the early modern period tended to categorise them as virgins, wives or widows, and that 'deviant' women 'were typified as shrews, wantons and even witches' (1998, p. 23). David Underdown points out that the period 1600–40 was one preoccupied with women as a threat to the social order (1985, p. 120), and notes the concomitant rise of prosecutions for witchcraft, which I will discuss in due course (it is very pertinent to the Frances Howard case). The threat of disorder to the patriarchy represented by deviant women was perceived as a spectrum, and the implication was that the different categories of female misbehaviour, from disobedient wives to scolds, from unfaithful wives to whores, were all interrelated.

In the sixteenth century, it was still taken as a given that women would remain subject to their menfolk; to their fathers before marriage and to their husbands after, and this was endorsed by the early modern understanding of biblical teaching: the words of St Paul that wives should submit to their husbands, since 'the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church' were very familiar (Ephesians 5:22–3). Eales quotes a sermon dating from 1619, attributed to one William Whately, which describes a woman's 'chiefest ornament' as 'lowliness of mind, which should cause her to maintain [...] a mean account of herself, and of her own abilities' (cited in Eales 1998, p. 25). Whately also argued that women who inverted the orthodox equation of power would undoubtedly prove unfaithful: those who refused to loyally obey their husbands would soon also abandon their vow of chastity (p. 30). Once again, attitudes and behaviour were seen as interrelated, with one form of disobedience inevitably leading on to another.

At the extreme end of the spectrum of female deviance lay the shadowy domain of witchcraft, something that greatly preoccupied James I, and which is very pertinent to our understanding of the stories that would grow up around Frances Howard. The monarch's fascination with witches was one of the reasons why it became a feature of the social and cultural landscape of the time, but it is of a piece with a mind set that was still crowded with hopes of heaven and fears of hell, and that understood angels and devils as physical beings. Although popular history and culture may have exaggerated the number of people (almost all of them women) who were tried and executed as witches, Brian Levack's conservative calculation still puts the number of deaths at around 50,000 in Europe over a period of approximately 300 years, from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century (2013, pp. 5–6). The sense of a spectrum of female deviant behaviour is useful to help

understand why witchcraft was evoked on such a regular basis, with the morality of women tied so closely to concepts of good and evil. According to Reginald Scot, writing in 1584, the 'chief fault' of witches 'is that they are scolds' (cited in Borman 2013, p. 3). It is also important to note that the witch was often associated with sexuality spun out of control. Heinrich Kramer's discourse on demonology, *Malleus maleficarum* [*The Hammer of the Witches*] (1486), a book close to King James's heart, included the assertion that women rather than men are associated with witchcraft 'because of fleshly lust, which in [women] is never satisfied' (cited in Levack 2013, p. 450). Such thinking infused the culture of the time; in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the fierce misogyny of Duke Ferdinand is typical, conflating female deceptiveness and witchcraft in his assertion, 'They whose faces do belie their hearts / Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years – / Ay: and give the devil suck' (1.1.297–8). Webster's allusion here is to a common belief about witches' sexual congress with the devil. Levack suggests that Christian teaching on both Catholic and Protestant sides posited the witch as the 'polar opposite' of the obedient and passive wife, and contrasted her with '[t]he witch [who] was so assertive and sexually ravenous that she could be satiated only by demon lovers' (p. 496). As Louise Jackson argues, 'The strong links which were made between witchcraft and sexuality, the subsequent depiction of female desire as deviant, and the important prescriptive role of the witch trials in society, meant that the persecution of witches was an ideal mechanism for the control of women's sexual behaviour' (1995, p. 72).

While the shrew was a familiar figure in the cultural landscape, of all the stereotypes of women current during this period, Henderson and McManus suggest that the most heavily stressed was probably that of the seductress: 'the image of the woman as enticing, sexually insatiable, and deceitful in the service of her lust' (1985, p. 47).[4] They point out that Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' of the sonnets (c. 1609) is an indicative case, one that 'fits precisely the stereotype of the seductress' in all her deviousness and promiscuity (p. 101). The association with evil is commonplace and often remarkably vehement, as I will show in due course in my consideration of Jacobean stage representations of 'deviant' women. Henderson and McManus posit that the myth of the seductress may have been rooted in the fact that couples tended to marry relatively late (contrary to the popular impression figured in *Romeo and Juliet*, which dates from around 1591). Although arranged marriages among the aristocracy often involved matching individuals in their teens, the average age for the vast majority was mid-to-late twenties (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, p. 108). In this context, sexual

desire had to be repressed, since sex was only tolerated within marriage. 'It seems likely', Henderson and McManus suggest, 'that in seeing the opposite sex as lustful Renaissance men and women were dealing with their own unruly sexual feelings by projecting them onto each other' (1985, p. 56). However, while it is true that female sexuality seems to have come under particular scrutiny at this point in history, there is nothing new in the suspicion and fear which met it, or in the way it was anatomised, exaggerated and depicted in the early modern period. If some occasionally deigned to blame men for 'unruly sexual feelings', their voices were hard to discern amid the accusations targeted at unruly women. As always, the double standard that tolerated male sexual disobedience while targeting and sharply disciplining female sexual misbehaviour ruled supreme. That attitude sits deep within the warp and woof of the misogyny that has historically defined Western culture, and it is woven too into the male impetus to shift sexual guilt onto women. Indeed, we do not need to look very far to locate contemporary equivalents. The so-called Slut Walk phenomenon was sparked in 2011 by a Toronto policeman suggesting that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized' (slutwalktoronto.com): the Slut Walks were staged around the world by groups of women in the days, months and years that followed in order to challenge patriarchal attitudes towards female sexuality. Some ingrained attitudes die hard.

She knows too much to argue: The *querelle des femmes*

As we have already seen, meditations upon the nature of woman, and her position in relation to man, date back to the time of the Church fathers (fourth, fifth and sixth centuries); and, stretching back before then, Aristotle's insistence in the fourth century BC that women were essentially defective men was hugely influential on early Christian thinking. However, a decisive shift is detectable in the medieval period, with the tremors growing ever stronger in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Patricia Demers suggests that there were three peak decades in the sixteenth century: the 1540s, when 'a flurry of treatises coincided with Henry VIII's experiments with his last three wives'; the 1560s, coinciding with a series of attempts to persuade the unmarried Elizabeth into 'strategic matches'; and in the second decade of James's reign (2005, p. 37), which coincides with the Overbury affair. Underdown reflects: 'The flood of Jacobean anti-feminist literature and the concurrent public obsession with the scolding women, domineering and unfaithful wives,

clearly suggests that the patriarchy could no longer be taken for granted' (1985, pp. 116–17).

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, two important works set out to challenge the misogyny that had characterised writings about women up to that point: Giovanni Bocaccio's *De mulieribus Claris* (c. 1380) and Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* (1405), which was translated into English in 1521 (Wiesner 2000, pp. 20–1). Debates about the position of women in society, and in particular with regard to their relationships with men, became increasingly heated during the second half of the sixteenth century. From the anonymous *The Schoolhouse of Women* (1541), via Puritan John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) to perhaps the most notorious misogynist tract of them all, Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* (1615), there was a proliferation of texts focused on the nature of women, and the debate that grew out of them during this period is sometimes referred to as the *querelle des femmes*. What is more, this was no rarified debate: Swetnam's immensely popular *Arraignment*, for example, went through ten editions between 1615 and 1637. The tone of these tracts varies considerably. Some are argued in great earnest, while others strategise more imaginatively, with irony and occasional humour. One of the later writings, John Taylor's *A Juniper Lecture* (1639), advised husbands on appropriate courses for action when dealing with wives who prove troublesome:

> Dub a dub, kill her with a club,
> Be thy wife's master.
> [...]
> But if she persist, and will have her will,
> Oh, then bang her, bang her, bang her still.

Humorous or not, as Dympna Callaghan points out, 'Brutality is the model of conjugality here, and even the rhythms of the verse imply a certain relish at the prospect of what we would now call marital rape' (2006, p. 4).

It takes at least two to make a *querelle*. The writings of early modern misogynists are actually far more fascinating for the spirited defences they provoked, most of which (though not all) were written by women. The most notable are probably Jane Anger's *Protection for Women* (1589), William Heale's *An Apology for Women* (1609), Rachel Speght's *A Muzzle for Melastomus* (1617), *Esther Hath Hanged Haman* (1617) by the presumably pseudonymous Esther Sowernam (the name is almost an anagram

of Joseph Swetnam) and *The Worming of a Mad Dog* (1617) by Constantia Munda, whom some critics believe was probably a man.[5] Swetnam's essay even provoked a play satirising his views, *Swetnam the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women* (1620). These defences of woman would often refute misogynist tracts point by point, and Swetnam's received the most attention. Sowernam offers up a pleasing heckle when she takes issue with Swetnam's contention that woman is 'crooked' because she was formed from a rib: 'Woman was made of a crooked rib, so she is crooked of conditions,' she scoffs. 'Joseph Swetnam was made as from Adam of clay and dust, so he is of a dirty and muddy disposition' (cited in H&M 1985, p. 222).

Sexuality, of course, is always central to the *femme fatale* meme, and the supposition that women were potentially more highly sexed than men underpins the writing of Swetnam and those like him. Margaret Spufford points out that there were a considerable number of chap-books of the period that chose to portray women as sexually insatiable (1981, pp. 64, 80n). The author of *Schoolhouse* cited Teiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology who had lived as both man and woman and had declared that the female was 'far more lecherous' than the male (cited in H&M 1985, p. 146). According to Swetnam, women are 'subtle and dangerous for men to deal with, for their faces are lures, their beauties are bates, their looks are nets, and their words charms, all to bring men to ruin'. Later, he insists that the 'heads, hands, and hearts, minds and souls' of women 'are evil, for women are called the hook of all evil because men are taken by them as fish is taken with the hook'. Swetnam lambasts their supposed promiscuity by comparing women to a barber's chair, 'a common hackney for everyone that will ride' and 'a boat for everyone to row in' (cited in H&M 1985, pp. 195, 200, 205).

Hand in hand with this belief went the ideology, shared across Catholicism and Protestantism, that the purpose of sexual intercourse was procreation. The idea of sexual activity as something pleasurable in itself, or as an expression of love between husband and wife, was not part of the orthodox teaching of the time. Some, following St Paul's edict ('But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn', 1 Corinthians 7:9), conceded that marriage could also 'provided a legitimate outlet' for sexual desire; St Augustine had taught that, in addition to procreation, marriage could be understood as 'a remedy against carnal desires' (cited in Sommerville 1995, p. 127).

One of the things that the anti-misogynist ripostes did particularly effectively was to challenge the familiar double standard in terms of

sexual relations, and to refute more generally suggestions that women were more prone to sin and corruption than men. The sexual double standard had been a key target for Christine de Pizan; the writers who engaged with the rhetoric of Swetnam, Knox and others continued to worry at the issue, refusing to allow male presumptions to go unchallenged. Jane Anger, for example, counters the conventional notion that women are more prone to lust than men by reeling off a list of men from classical legend and literature that should serve as 'examples sufficiently probable to persuade you that the hearts of men are most desirous to excel in vice' (cited in H&M 1985, p. 184). And Sowernam made the point that the goddess of love, Venus, was 'good', and it was her son Cupid that 'presided over lust' (cited in H&M 1985, p. 228).

The sheer number of texts engaging one another in heated exchange is a symptom of the shifting of ideological tectonic plates, and in this sense such documents form a vital element in our understanding of the social and cultural context of the Howard affair. However, there is also a more direct connection between the *querelle* and the Overbury scandal, and that is one of Overbury's own poems, 'The Wife', a rather weak but, as it would turn out, extremely popular verse discourse on the nature of the ideal life companion. Compiled with a selection of 'Characters', sketches of various types of personalities, the book proved extremely popular. Because of its first known publication date – 1614 – it has been assumed that the poem was written in part to try to dissuade Robert Carr from marrying Frances Howard, but Joshua Eckhardt points out that it is most likely to date originally from 1608, some time before the Howard/Carr affair began (2006, p. 53). Having said that, the decision to reprint the poem (opportunistically retitled 'The Wife, Now The Widow'), supplemented with various elegies penned in posthumous tribute to the poem's author, can no doubt be attributed to the scandal that erupted as the true circumstances of his death began to be scrutinised. These elegies were included from the seventh edition on, with nine editions then appearing between 1616 and 1618. The book's popularity 'made these elegies on Overbury among the longest available and best-selling literary reflections on the scandal' (Bellany 2002, pp. 115–16). For the book's editors, and no doubt for its readers, too, there was a pleasingly sharp tang of irony that this panegyric to the perfect woman was re-appearing in the wake of its unfortunate author's death; a death by poisoning at the hands of a malicious, sexually manipulative woman who was said to have had dealings with witchcraft.

One good deed before she died: The dangerous woman on stage

The pamphlets that appeared in the so-called *querelle des femmes* are culturally significant in a number of ways, not least because they were part of a literary movement that extended out from beyond the elite to a much more diverse and bourgeois audience (H&M 1985, p. 29). However, another fascinating forum for this kind of debate – albeit in a more indirect form – can be located in the playhouses of the early modern period. From the late sixteenth century until the closure of the theatres by the Puritans in 1642, both comic and tragic drama in England flourished. The plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, especially in the last 30 or 40 years, for their representations of gender, and the drama of the Jacobean period in particular – notably the genres of revenge tragedy and city comedy – are remarkable for their varied and often provocative portrayals of female characters.

A number of the plays I will discuss were written after the annulment and the Overbury scandals had erupted: *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), *The Witch* (c. 1616, but possibly as early as 1611),[6] *The Changeling* (1622) and *The True Tragicomedy* (c. 1655). The others – *The Insatiate Countess* (c. 1610) and *The White Devil* (1612) – were written and first performed before the events. The former are interesting for the clear topical references to the affairs that they contain, but in some ways more intriguing are the texts, or elements of the later texts, that were not directly inspired by Frances Howard, but which best illustrate the kind of archetypes that were in play on the Jacobean stage at the time, and which illuminate the representations of the woman in question. Another play by Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, is particularly difficult to date, but it may have been written as early as 1612: certainly it is possible to read the final masque staged in the play as containing references to the entertainments staged for Frances's second marriage, notably Ben Jonson's *Hymenaei*.[7] The play has shown a number of characters manipulating the institution of marriage for their own ends, and the masque in Act 5 stages a woman's affections divided between two men. With the play's extraordinary denouement, which sees characters die poisoned by incense, by wine, by arrows shot by a row of Cupids and via a trapdoor, *Women Beware Women* might well be one of the most incendiary of the Frances Howard intertexts.[8]

However, of primary interest to me are the explorations of female characters, particularly in the context of love, intrigue, conspiracy and

murder, for it is here we may find the more intriguing crossover effect I am seeking – the blurring of the real and the fictive. A consideration of some of the most provocative female characters should shed more light on the predominant beliefs about women and, in particular, with the specific plays I will consider, the overlap of the 'real' Frances with the images of the seductive, dangerous woman that were current in the popular culture of the period.

I have written elsewhere (Simkin 2006) about the rise of the tragic heroine in early modern tragedy. The drama of the Jacobean period had tended to move away from the political realm in both comedic and tragic genres, with domestic and intimate settings featuring much more prominently. McLuskie and Bevington remark upon the mixed gender audiences in the playhouses at this time and speculate that 'the presence of women in the theatres offered a marketing opportunity', with '[s]tories of domestic life and from the life of the city provid[ing] the possibility of pleasing a wider audience'. As they note, in the comedies, 'the dangerous emotions of love and sexual passion are suppressed [...] with bawdy mockery and witty devices', while in tragedy, 'similar competitive forces explode in violence and death' (1999, pp. 1, 28). This is not to say that these plays shifted definitively away from courtly characters, but the focus was increasingly on personal, rather than state, politics. There are a few exceptions; the most notable is probably *Arden of Faversham* (authorship uncertain, date around 1588–92), which is unusual in that it focuses on a town mayor, his wife and her lover, along with a collection of everyday figures that includes a couple of murderous rogues memorably named Shakebag and Black Will. *Arden* is also, incidentally, an intriguing precursor of the Snyder love triangle, and of the *Postman Always Rings Twice/Double Indemnity* intertexts, telling as it does the true crime story of Alice Arden's love affair with Mosby and their plot to kill the mayor, Alice's husband.

However, while courtly settings are seen at this time as most appropriate for high tragedy, even a play such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, set in an Italian court and dealing with the corrupt workings of state power, has at its heart a very private tragedy, a tale of sexual jealousy and intrigue: a woman newly widowed is instructed by her brothers to remain single, but immediately woos and secretly marries her servant Antonio. This sparks cycles of revenge as her brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, move to punish her and in turn are targeted by the malcontent Bosola, whose loyalties shift from them to the Duchess. The mainspring of the play is one woman's sexual desire set against her family's expectations for her in terms of love and marriage – not so very far away

from the predicament of Frances Howard, whose second wedding took place probably within months of Webster's play being premiered at the Blackfriars Theatre.

Webster's earlier play *The White Devil* offers a more archetypal *femme fatale*: Vittoria Corombona is married to an elderly and foolish man, and she persuades her lover Bracciano (also married) to arrange the deaths of their respective spouses, Camillo and Isabella, in order to clear the way for them to wed. This Bracciano does, with the help of Vittoria's brother Flamineo. In the aftermath, Vittoria is arrested and put on trial, ostensibly for conspiracy in the murder plot. When the case collapses, the Cardinal steps down from his position as judge and accuses Vittoria of being a prostitute, ordering that she be imprisoned in a house of penitent whores. Bracciano springs her from her prison, and they marry. However, the murder plots have aroused the suspicions of Isabella's brother, the Duke Francisco, and he infiltrates Bracciano and Vittoria's wedding celebrations. There, his assassins murder Bracciano, and, finally, Vittoria herself, her maid Zanche and the scheming malcontent Flamineo.

The women in *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil* are identified as villainous from the very start: based on a real Italian woman, Vittoria Accoramboni, murdered in 1585, Vittoria is the White Devil of the play's title, the epithet implying hypocrisy and the notion of moral evil disguised beneath a beautiful mask. In describing her in these terms – 'the very antithesis of the Renaissance ideal of woman: disobedient, defiant of convention, sexual, subversive, she displays the assertion rather than the subordination of self' – Gayle Greene could almost be summarising popular perceptions of Frances Howard (1982, p. 15). *Arden of Faversham* is described on the title page of its first edition as presenting 'the great malice and dissimulation of a wicked woman, the unsatiable desire of filthy lust and the shameful end of all murderers' (McLuskie and Bevington 1999, p. 29), and here too the sense that we are back in Swetnam territory is hard to shake. Furthermore, the damning judgement on Alice could equally have been lifted from one of the libels written about Frances, or from one of the accounts penned by historians such as Weldon, Sanderson and D'Ewes.

The virgin/whore binary – the division of women into virtuous and chaste, sinful and promiscuous – is buried deep at the heart of many Jacobean tragedies, as is the abiding, Medusa-like fear that behind the mask of beauty lie sin and evil (we will find the same dichotomy in the representations of Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox). The deployment of the virgin/whore binary in contrasting figures in the drama

may, as Jocelyn Catty notes, 'serve [...] to heighten the glory of the plays' heroines. However, it also establishes promiscuity as normative female behaviour' (2010, p. 11). It is this assumption of the insatiable female that leads the eponymous tragic hero in Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) into a frenzy of sexual jealousy over his wife Desdemona, as he tries to reconcile his image of her as pure and chaste – an image he now believes to be a mirage, the result of his wife's white lie and his own self-delusion – with the 'cunning whore of Venice' that Iago has convinced him is her true persona (4.2.91). From a pit of jealous despair, he plots the execution of the one he calls 'the fair devil' (3.3.485). Similarly, *The Duchess of Malfi* finds Ferdinand musing that his sister's 'fault and beauty, / Blended together, show like leprosy, / The whiter the fouler' (3.3.62–4). Arthur Wilson is working with a similar paradigm of morals and behaviour when he presents Frances's decision to wear her hair down for her wedding to Robert Carr 'in the habit of a Virgin' as 'impudent'; he remarks that this 'Ornament of her Body (though a fair one) could not cover the deformities of her Soul' and adds, scathingly, 'her indeed lovely Cheeks did not betray themselves to blushes' (Wilson 1653, p. 72). The dilemma is a familiar double bind for women in this position, and the parallels with the Knox and Snyder cases are very striking (see pp. 159–65 and 97–9). As David Lindley points out, if Frances had not worn her hair down, 'that would have been tantamount to admitting that the annulment was a fraud'; on the other hand, if she had kept her hair up, 'then immediately ribald tongues could wag' (1993, p. 132).

It certainly seems to be the case that Frances was celebrated for her beauty from an early age. Even her most virulent detractors recognised that there was something extraordinary about her: Arthur Wilson described her as 'growing to be a beauty of the greatest magnitude in that horizon [...] and object for admirers, and every tongue grew an orator at that shrine' (1656, p. 56). However, just as in these plays beauty is more often aligned with evil than it is with good, so Frances's beauty would become grist to the mill for those who chose in due course to portray her as hopelessly corrupt. In the fictive world, pure, virtuous, chaste, beautiful women do populate the drama, but they are inevitably less vital and far less interesting than their flawed counterparts. The notion of Frances as a kind of white devil is certainly a seductive one, and not only for the seventeenth-century writers. For Beatrice White, Frances was 'the spoilt beauty of a corrupt court' and 'a great beauty who, trained from childhood in the arts of flirtation and seduction, scintillated amongst the lesser galaxies of that Court with arresting splendour'

(1965, pp. 17, 24). The idea that Frances Howard was corrupted by the court is a strong theme in Wilson's *A History of Great Britain* too; he suggests that Devereux found it almost impossible to pry her away from the court 'till she were estranged from the relish, and taste of the delights she sucked in there' (1653, p. 58). The same suspicion about the court's corrupting influence can be traced in the drama of the period, notably in *The Duchess of Malfi*, where Ferdinand warns his sister the Duchess: 'You live in a rank pasture, here, i'the court; / There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly; / 'Twill poison your fame' (1.1.293–5).

Corrupted or corrupting? Lindley points out that a number of more recent historians including Williamson (1978) and Stone (1965) have chosen to follow Weldon's lead on the characterisation of Frances as a promiscuous young woman who had had many affairs (1993, p. 66). Once again, the association of active sexuality with female deviance is wearyingly familiar. One of the most virulent rumours that circulated about Frances prior to her union with Carr was the particularly scandalous story that she had had an affair with the young Prince Henry: '[she] first caught his eye and heart, and afterward prostituted herself to him, who first reaped the fruits of her virginity', according to D'Ewes (cited in White 1965, p. 24). Francis Osborne, in the character sketches that preface his play *The True Tragicomedy*, writes that 'Prince Henry was so captivated by her eyes, which then found no matches but themselves, that the house of Suffok took the boldness to own him for their prisoner of love' (cited in Potter 1983, p. 9). The match, if there was one, did not last. According to Wilson, once Frances had ceased her pursuit of the prince, 'being taken with the growing fortunes of the Viscount Rochester [Carr], and grounding more hope upon him', Henry also chose to slight her. At a dance, offered Frances's glove which had been dropped, he 'refused to receive it, saying publicly, He would not have it, it is stretcht by another, meaning the Viscount' (Wilson 1653, p. 56). It is a moment that is echoed quite startlingly in *The Changeling* (of which more later) when the servant De Flores retrieves the glove Beatrice-Joanna has dropped and offers it to her. She expresses her loathing for De Flores (who is sexually obsessed with Joanna) by spurning the glove, removing the other of the pair from her hand and throwing it in his face: 'Take 'em and draw thine own skin off with 'em,' she sneers (1.1.228). De Flores is left holding the glove, commenting ruefully to the audience that 'She had rather wear my pelt tanned in a pair / Of dancing pumps than I should thrust my fingers / Into her sockets here' (1.1.229–32). The sexual pun is most overt, and the connection with the story about Prince Henry unmistakeable.

Lindley makes the point that Wilson's and D'Ewes's depictions of the affair between Frances and Prince Henry are intended primarily to cast the prince in a favourable light (resisting the charms of the temptress) and to reinforce the sense of Carr as 'a virtuous man led astray by Circean female charms' (1993, p. 66). According to D'Ewes, Carr was quickly ensnared by Frances, 'subjecting himself to the lustful appetite of an evil woman' (cited in Halliwell 1845, pp. 348–9). In the course of his investigations, Coke procured the information (or gossip) that the pox-stricken apothecary James Franklin often attended Frances in her bedchamber before she rose in the morning. Anne Somerset notes Coke's disgust at the news that a carrier of venereal disease could be granted admittance to a noblewoman's bedroom, and 'saw it as further proof of Frances's depraved character'; he was also 'confident that others would share his outrage' (Somerset 1997, pp. 343–44). Furthermore, Somerset quotes Franklin's desperate attempt to defend himself in court, and his contention that 'those two women [Frances and Anne Turner], what with their gifts, what with their fair speeches were able to seduce any man' and that he had been unable 'to withstand their charming tongues' (1997, p. 345).

Power, greed and corruptible seed: *The Duchess of Malfi*

We should not be surprised to find the drama of the Jacobean period responding to the state of James's court, although when it did so, it was always covert. Punishment for authors of any writings dramatic or otherwise that could be considered seditious was swift and harsh. J.W. Lever, writing in 1971, believes that the aim of the writers of revenge tragedies 'was not to re-create history, but to express contemporary anxieties by transposing them into a period and setting which had become the type and pattern of naked despotism' (1987, p. 20); that is to say, Italy of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lever sees in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), for instance, a play 'acutely responsive to the contemporary scene [...] a lurid picture of waste and corruption, in which wealth and fertility are being squandered away by spendthrift heirs, the new rich, and noblemen turned courtiers' (p. 30). *The Duchess of Malfi* is most explicit in its denunciation of a corrupt court, and its impact upon those who inhabit it. The opening speech, courtesy of Antonio, newly returned from his travels, depicts for his friend Delio the harmonious state of the French court, and provides the audience with an image of the ideal state against which they will judge the Arragonian court of Ferdinand, the Cardinal and the Duchess:

> . . . a prince's court
> Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
> Pure silver-drops in general. But if 't chance
> Some curs'd example poison't near the head,
> Death and diseases through the whole land spread.
>
> (1.1.11–15)

It is hard to imagine a Jacobean audience failing to connect Antonio's description of the French 'judicious king' who 'quits first his royal palace / Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute / And infamous persons' (1.1.8–10) with their own monarch.

Ironically, Duke Ferdinand himself seems at least half-aware of his sister the Duchess's vulnerability in the court, newly widowed as she is. He and his brother the Cardinal have low expectations, more in line with commonplace stereotypes of widowhood circulating in early modern culture: that the Duchess will not be able to control her sexual urges for long; that 'women like that part which, like the lamprey, / Hath ne'er a bone in't' (1.1.322–3); and that a bereaved woman's resolution to remain unmarried 'commonly [. . .] lasts no longer / Than the turning of an hour-glass' (1.1.290–1). 'Farewell, lusty widow', Ferdinand quips, as he leaves her (1.1.326). The Duchess meanwhile is repeatedly represented in a way that sets purity and chastity against unbridled sexuality, but in subtly different ways when compared with the representation of Vittoria or Beatrice-Joanna. For Antonio, the steward of the Duchess of Malfi's household (whom she will soon secretly marry), her beauty is such that her looks 'were able raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy', while at the same time the 'divine [. . .] continence' in those same looks is such that it 'cuts off all lascivious and vain hope' (1.1.184–8). This contrasts strongly with the very different image presented by her brothers. Complicating the layers of irony still further, the Duchess summarily dismisses their advice to remain unmarried, and only moments later woos her servant Antonio, in an extraordinary reversal of gender roles necessitated by her noble birth and his relative lowliness. Although in this sense the match differs from that between Frances and Robert Carr, it is undeniably the case that Frances's decision to seek an annulment and remarriage was as bold as the Duchess's, when she declares, 'If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I would make them my low foot-steps' (1.1.327–9). However, while this may be performed as a woman bravely asserting her sexual autonomy, her brothers, when they hear of it, will not be so charitable in

their interpretation, horrified as they are by her choice to interbreed with someone of such lowly stock.

Frances was unusual for a number of qualities she displayed, qualities that today we might regard as positive, but which 400 years ago were viewed by most very differently. By objecting to the husband to whom she had been matched, she was challenging the authority not only of Robert Devereux but also of her father. By then asserting that Devereux was impotent, she was striking at the heart of patriarchy (or perhaps one should say its phallus). Lindley points out that the way the nullity trial was conducted was determined in part by the 'need to contain potential damage to the whole edifice of Essex's masculine honour' (p. 96): hence Devereux's insistence that he was only impotent when lying with *her*. One 'heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend who' kind of tale had Devereux arising from his bed one morning, in the presence of half a dozen 'men of worth', and lifting his shift to show them all 'so able and extraordinarily sufficient matter, that they all cried out shame of his lady and said, That if the ladies of the court knew as much as they knew, they would tread her to death' (Abbot 1715, p. 42). The stories of his impotence were even being revived 30 years later at the beginning of the Civil War: Devereux was a hero of the parliamentarian forces, and royalist factions mocked both his first marriage to Frances Howard and his second, to Elizabeth Pawlett, which also failed; further humiliation followed when Pawlett had an illegitimate child Devereux was compelled to acknowledge as his own (Bellany 2002, p. 271–2).

In any case, set against this rather too literal willy-waving is Frances who, by asserting her right to sexual satisfaction, was also inevitably offering herself up to those who would stereotype her as the insatiable female who had given herself over to physical pleasure. After all, at this time '[w]omen were expected to be sexually responsive, but only at the dictation of their husbands' (Lindley 1993, p. 104). Simonds D'Ewes accused her of being 'most inconstant, of a loose life, suffering her body to be abused, and others to make shipwreck of her modesty, and to abrogate the rights of marriage'; her 'insatiate appetite', he writes, led her into affairs that 'brought herself unto the contempt of the world' (Halliwell 1845, pp. 332–3).

There are strong parallels in all this with the title character of Webster's play. Determined to outface convention, the Duchess of Malfi courts Antonio, and secretly marries him. This by no means qualifies her as a *femme fatale*, even though early modern audiences would probably have found her behaviour more reprehensible than contemporary audiences tend to: her maid Cariola believes her pursuit of Antonio 'shows / A fearful madness' and concludes, 'I owe her much of pity' (1.1.488–9).

Audiences and readers of the play today are inclined to see her pursuit of her own desires and her autonomy as heroic, and her sad end tragic. The sex maniac of Ferdinand's overheated imagination is his own projection – he pictures her with 'some strong thigh'd bargeman; / Or one o' th' wood-yard [...] or else some lovely squire' (2.5.42–5) in a bewildering succession of images conjured up by his fury and sexual jealousy. What the play presents us with – radically so, since Webster was swimming against the tide of misogynist rhetoric – is a very different kind of woman: a transgressor, perhaps; a woman determined to pursue her own desires and face down the patriarchy; but a woman tender and proud, an independent spirit, and an emotionally engaging tragic heroine.

Furthermore, *Malfi* is a play much preoccupied with scandal, the kind of court gossip that whispered Frances's name down the corridors of Whitehall's 1,500 rooms; Ferdinand, confronting the Duchess over her secret marriage, tells her a story about the allegorical figure Reputation who reports that 'it is my nature, / If once I part from any man I meet, / I am never found again' [3.2.132–4]); Ferdinand accuses her of ruining her own. Shortly before this, Antonio has related to his friend Delio with a heavy heart the rumours that are circulating about the Duchess in the wake of her giving birth to more children: 'The common rabble, do directly say / She is a strumpet' (3.1.25–6). *Malfi* offers us a vivid snapshot of patriarchy's nightmare of the female as inconstant ('A man might strive to make glass malleable, / Ere he should make [women] fixed', remarks the Cardinal [2.4.14–15]) and, in Ferdinand's fantasies, as erotomaniac. There are also some brutal images of the kind of retribution such transgressors might inspire in jealous men – Ferdinand wants to wrap his sister and her lover in their bedsheets, dip them in sulphur, 'and then light them like a match' (2.5.69–70). However, the Duchess herself does not fit the stereotype, and we must look elsewhere for early modern constructions of the *femme fatale*. Nevertheless, if today we choose to lionise the Duchess when Webster's contemporaries might have been far more ambivalent, we must also understand that the common perception of Howard in the seventeenth century would have been much closer to Ferdinand's 'notorious strumpet, [...] loose i' th' hilts' (2.5.4,3).

Inside the museums, the women go up on trial: *The White Devil*

Vittoria, despite being *The White Devil*'s titular heroine, has only four scenes that are crucial in her portrayal: the love scene between her and Bracciano (1.2), the arraignment (3.2), the scene set in the house

of penitent whores to which she is sentenced at the end of the trial (4.2) and her death scene (5.6). In each instance, her behaviour can be construed as radically different from her preceding appearance. Indeed Vittoria, like other women in Jacobean tragedy, works better if understood as a site of ideological struggle rather than a consistent, psychologically 'real' character. In pure narrative terms, she operates as the mainspring of the revenge plot in so far as Bracciano's desire to marry her leads him to plot the murder of his wife and her husband. However, the role of Vittoria is also predicated on her sexuality and her duplicity, and in this she functions as an early modern example of the *femme fatale* mythotype.

From her first appearance, she appears as a morally compromised figure: the second scene of the play establishes that she is married and intent on pursuing an affair with Bracciano; before the end of the scene, she is plotting the death of her husband Camillo. There are early references to Camillo's impotence – 'so unable to please a woman that, like a Dutch doublet, all his back is shrunk into his breeches'(1.2. 30–2) – and Camillo grumbles to his brother-in-law Flamineo that 'I do not well remember, I protest, /When I last lay with her [. . .] We never lay together, but ere morning / There grew a great flaw between us' (1.2.51–4). In this regard, rumours about Robert Devereux's impotence, or his unhappy attempts to consummate his marriage, drew on ideas that were very current in the culture of the period. Flamineo engineers an opportunity for his sister to meet with Bracciano, and her first scene (1.2) depicts their lovers' tryst, in the course of which she recounts a dream that, as Flamineo informs the audience, hints to her lover that he should 'make away with his duchess and her husband' (1.2.240). Her brother marvels at her skilful cunning: 'Excellent devil', he exclaims (1.2.239).

The play establishes very swiftly, then, that Vittoria is a woman trapped in a marriage that she finds loathsome, and it is clear that Camillo's impotence is at the heart of her dissatisfaction; again, the parallels with Frances and Devereux are hard to miss. Bracciano arranges a divorce from his wife Isabella and, in short order, both she and Camillo will die, leaving him and Vittoria to wed. After Vittoria is arrested under suspicion of murder, her arraignment is set up not to *establish* her guilt, but to *parade* her guilt and shame (as her accuser Cardinal Monticelso hopes) for all to see. He repeatedly reminds his two audiences (a group of foreign ambassadors invited to witness the arraignment onstage, and the play's spectators off-stage), that what may appear beautiful on the outside may hide an inner corruption. Meanwhile, Vittoria's *hic mulier*

tendencies are emphasised throughout, most especially in the dominant role she plays in the early stages of her relationship with Bracciano, and in her insistence on speaking up in her own defence during the arraignment scene. Vittoria offends by her refusal to remain silent – 'She scandals our proceedings', Monticelso protests, as she attempts to speak in her own defence (3.2.130) – and is punished accordingly. Vittoria denies the charges laid against her, and the audience is well aware that her protestations are false. Nevertheless, her determination to outface the accusations seems to demand the respect of the audience (again, both on- and off-stage). In her magnificent riposte to Cardinal Monticelso's lengthy (23 lines) 'character of a whore' speech (3.2.79–102), she declares:

> For your names
> Of whore and murderess, they proceed from you,
> As, if a man should spit against the wind,
> The filth returns in's face.
>
> (3.2.148–51)

Even the foreign ambassadors have to admit that, while 'She hath lived ill', nevertheless 'She hath a brave spirit' (3.2.107, 140).

And what of Frances? Challenging the charges laid against her would have put her in the Vittoria mould – the woman who, by speaking out against patriarchal authority, reinforces the perception of her as deviant. Indeed, the historian Anne Somerset describes a much feistier, Vittoria-like Frances in one of her initial encounters with Lord Justice Coke who visited her on a number of occasions in order to elicit as much information as he could from her and, no doubt, hoping for a straightforward confession that might also implicate her husband. Outraged at the news that the Lord Chief Justice had incorporated into Weston's trial details of her affair with Carr, Frances refused to speak to him: 'Don't try to trick me like you tricked those poor people you had executed', she is reported to have told him. 'Go away, because my life belongs to the King' (cited in Somerset 1997, p. 356). However, as Lord Chief Justice Coke pressed his advantage and continued his interrogation of Frances, she eventually broke. Frances confessed she was guilty on 12 January 1616, having given birth only a few weeks earlier. She was presented for trial on 24 May. Having pleaded guilty, the proceedings were concluded within a couple of hours, and Frances was sentenced to hang.

Coke bears some similarities in his approach and techniques to Cardinal Monticelso. Fired by the same sense of outrage at the woman's moral degeneracy, almost stronger than disgust at the crimes themselves, both of them rail at sin and impudence and, in particular, adultery. Lindley notes how Coke draws a short, straight line between adultery and murder at Elwes's trial ('A man shall seldome see an Adultery of as high degree indeed, but accompanied with Murther') and matches it to Monticelso's aphorism, 'next the devil adultery, / Enters the devil murder' (3.2.111–12) (1993, pp. 167–8). Webster was fond of aphorisms – his plays are peppered with them, sometimes tediously so – but they are most revealing for our purposes, since they tap into the contemporary discourse and common culture of the time, the same currency that constructs the image of a woman left unsatisfied by an impotent husband. Indeed, as Lindley points out, this link between adultery and murder was not an uncommon association (once again, female sin exists on a spectrum), and Coke exploited its potential as much as he could in the trials leading up to Frances's own. As in Perugia 400 years later, innocent or guilty, the charge of murder laid against a woman weighs much more heavily when freighted with moral judgements about her character and in particular about allegedly aberrant sexual behaviour.

As I shall show in each of my case studies, the accused woman's appearance in court has always attracted a good deal of commentary. The primary sources for the later studies are more voluminous, but even among the relatively sparse documentation of Frances's trial there is enough evidence to suggest her appearance and her behaviour were intended to maximise her chances of eliciting mercy at the hands of her accusers. One contemporary commentator, Edward Palavicino, drew on theatrical analogies in his description of her appearance: 'truly noble, fashioned to act a tragedy with so much sweetness, grace and good form, as if all the graces had heaped their whole powers to render her that day the most beloved, the most commiserate spectacle' (cited in Bellany 2002, p. 242). John Chamberlain was more sceptical, considering her 'sober demeanour [...] more curious and confident, than was fit for a lady in such distress'[9]. The modern historians who have written most extensively about the case seem to agree that her appearance was a calculated performance; White draws a picture of a woman fashioning her appearance carefully: 'The prisoner had dressed modestly for the occasion, in black, as became a penitent, relieved by the dazzling white of a "cobweb lawn ruff and cuffs" which set off her compelling blonde beauty to perfection' (1965, p. 145). Bellany writes: 'The countess's sober dress, penitent demeanour and ready confession of guilt – in

short, her performance of modest femininity – made a powerful impression' (2002, p. 242). In the same way that some journalists would dismiss Ruth Snyder's tears as a performance (see p. 105), Chamberlain hinted as much when he described Frances weeping in these terms: 'yet she shed or *made show of* some few tears divers times' (cited in Bellany 2002, p. 242, my emphasis). Nevertheless, whether it was genuine contrition or skilled performance, 'by confessing her crime and remaining modestly silent during her hearing, she conformed herself admirably to the female stereotype of obedient passivity' (Lindley 1993, p. 184). White clearly believes that this was a performance she had had much practice in preparation for: 'Frances, who had danced so enchantingly through the glitter and poetry of the Court masques, was capable of taking the stage with all the grace and assurance not only of rank, but of talent' (1965, p. 150).

In court, then, Frances was no Vittoria, even if she had shown a remarkable sense of autonomy and a remarkable degree of bravery in pursuing her own desires in terms of her marriage partner. We should not be surprised that she followed the wisest course as she prepared for her trial. After all, by the time she appeared in court, the trials that had gone before had already implicated her so heavily that there really was no way back. In that sense, the decision to admit her guilt might have been an early modern version of a plea bargain, hoping for mercy. Intriguingly, though purely speculatively, Anne Somerset also suggests Frances may have been suffering from post-natal depression and exhaustion at the time Coke interrogated her, having given birth less than a month earlier. She would not be the last to claim that, in such a stressed state, 'she simply found it easiest to agree to whatever interpretation Coke chose to put' on a seemingly incriminating letter to Elwes (Somerset 1997, p. 362); Knox would make a similar defence (exhaustion) when retracting her written confession to having been present in the flat when Meredith Kercher died (see p. 2). Carr, by contrast, remained resolute in his insistence on his innocence. To some extent, his gender, his rank and his former closeness to the king presumably offered some protection. For him, moreover, there were none of the sexual inflections or suspicions of witchcraft that pertained to Frances. In the same way, in *The White Devil* Bracciano seems untouchable: at the arraignment, he sits and observes in almost complete silence; when he finally erupts, he is challenged by Monticelso, roars back in defiance and then sweeps out of the hall, intoning '*Nemo me impune lacessit*' (3.2.179) – 'No-one harms me with impunity'. And he abandons Vittoria to her fate.

Visions of Joanna: *The Changeling*

Middleton and Rowley offer us one of the most provocative (anti-)heroines in all Jacobean drama in the form of Beatrice-Joanna, a noblewoman who is betrothed to one man (Alonzo de Piracquo), falls in love with and marries another (Alsemero), and has sex with a servant, De Flores, whom she apparently despises but who blackmails her into a sexual relationship after he has killed Alonzo at her request. When the plots and infidelities finally come to light, De Flores murders Beatrice-Joanna and then kills himself, in full view of Joanna's father and husband and the brother of the murdered Alonzo.[10]

While *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* offer tropes, characters, situations and lines that provide fascinating elements of synchronicity with the Frances Howard case, *The Changeling* is a play that seems to offer particular references to the scandal that are so overt, it is difficult to imagine members of the audience failing to pick up on them. One can even enjoy reading *The Changeling* as a re-imagining of the Howard-Devereux case with all creative caution cast to the wind: a kind of fan fiction version of the story, spiced up with class boundary transgressions and significant levels of bloodshed. Like Frances, Joanna finds herself bound to one man and falling in love with another. Like Frances, too, perhaps, Joanna takes decisive and radical steps to rid herself of the man she dislikes so intensely, even at the risk of incurring her father's anger. Arthur Wilson's account refers to the struggles between Frances and her father in resisting Devereux's attempts to remove her from court to take up residency in his country estate: 'The old man being troubled with his daughter's disobedience, embittered her being near him, with wearisome and continual chidings, to wean her from the sweets she doted on, and with much ado forced her into the country' (Wilson 1653, p. 58). In the first scene of *The Changeling*, Joanna's reluctance to marry Alonzo de Piracquo is represented as a battle of wills between her and her father: Vermandero is determined to cement the union, and remarks, 'I'll want [i.e. lack] my will else', to which Joanna slips in an aside: 'I shall want mine if you do it' (1.1. 217–18). Just as the annulment would hinge on Frances's virginity, Joanna makes much of her maidenhood, insisting to her father:

> I cannot render satisfaction
> Unto the dear companion of my soul,
> Virginity, whom I thus long have lived with,
> And part with it so rude and suddenly'.
>
> (1.1.190–3)

Vermandero is rather cruelly dismissive ('Tush, tush! There's a toy' 1.1.195), but Beatrice-Joanna's status as *virgo intacta* – or not – will become a significant bone of contention as the play unfolds.

While the probable references to the real court scandal are interesting, what is perhaps most provocative about Beatrice-Joanna in relation to Frances Howard is the way the play focuses so relentlessly on the gulf between her outward beauty and inner corruption. Nowhere is the early modern conviction that a beautiful exterior should mirror a morally beautiful interior so brutally exposed as it is in Middleton and Rowley's (anti-)heroine, and her fall is seen in these specific terms, that is to say, within the context of physical beauty and its spiritual polar opposite. When he discovers Joanna's affair with De Flores, her husband Alsemero is disgusted: 'O, thou art all deformed!' he tells her (5.3.77). Moments later, having confronted the man who has cuckolded him, he cries 'oh cunning devils! / How should blind men know you from fair-faced saints?' (5.3.108–9). It is a trope Shakespeare explored too in some of the more agonised sonnets, notably Sonnet 147: 'For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as light'. An anonymous poem written about Howard and Carr in the wake of Frances's trial works with the same idea, offering two contrasting views of her sins: in the 'Petitio' verse, the writer suggests her faults seem worse because 'In fairest pieces spots appear most plain'; in the 'Respontio', the suggestion is that 'It's strange to see a face so high in birth, / And heavenly, to converse so much with earth, / Nay more with hell' (cited in Bellany 2002, p. 243). Misogynist logic sets its roots deep in our culture; the rhetoric echoes down the centuries when we hear Knox described repeatedly as the devil with an angels' face (see p. 160).

One of the reasons why Beatrice-Joanna is so intriguing is because it is difficult to discern how aware she is of her sexuality. She has none of Vittoria's sexual confidence. Her early admission to the audience that 'I find / A giddy turning in me' is revealing (1.1.153–4), and would presumably have been even more resonant for a Jacobean audience accustomed to the notion that women lack the necessary self-control to master their emotions. Mary-Anne Doane writes of the *femme fatale* that her power is peculiar in that 'it is not usually subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the distinction between passivity and activity' (1991, p. 2). Beatrice-Joanna strikes a sexually confused and only half-aware figure, simultaneously repulsed by and erotically drawn to De Flores. 'I never see this fellow but I think / Of some harm towards me', she confides to the audience in soliloquy. 'Danger's in my mind still; / I scarce leave trembling of an hour after' (2.1.89–91).

The implication is that Beatrice-Joanna's hidden passions are unconsciously roused by De Flores's sexual attention. It is difficult to read their first sexual encounter as anything but a rape; it occurs off stage of course, but the build-up to it clearly shows De Flores overpowering her by a combination of blackmail and brute force. However, immediately after the dumb show that follows her exit with De Flores for that encounter, Beatrice reveals, 'This fellow has undone me endlessly' (4.1.1), which could as easily have a sexual connotation alongside its surface meaning of 'damned me eternally'. Karen Bamford has shown how in Jacobean drama 'the *truly* chaste woman is inviolable; her body may be "defouled" by symbolic rape or erotic torture but not sexually violated'; if a woman values her life above her chastity, 'her deviation is a sign of moral and spiritual corruption' (2000, p. 32). By portraying Beatrice-Joanna as a young woman in some kind of erotic thrall to De Flores, who was in the first half of the play the object of her spite and disdain, the play seems to mark her out not only as an unchaste woman, but as one embodying a corrupt and unnatural sexuality.

Certainly for De Flores, Joanna's turning from her betrothed to another lover is an indication that she is no different from other women who abandon chastity or fidelity, and he soliloquises about his fantasy of the insatiable woman:

> ... for if a woman
> Fly from one point, from him she makes a husband,
> She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic,
> One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand,
> Proves in time sutler to an army royal.
>
> (2.2.60–6)

The lines are strongly reminiscent of a libel of 1613 written about Frances Howard, where the idea of the promiscuous woman is supplemented by the image of sexual disease:

> To sea she goes upon an expedition
> Her canvas spreading, when she was inclined to
> Up she would fetch whom e'er she had a mind to
> Clap him aboard, take the best things he had
> And in exchange give him some o'erworn bad.
>
> (cited in Bellany 2002, p. 155)

A similar concept is elaborated in Osborne's docu-drama about Frances Howard, *The True Tragicomedy*, where the character of Davis reflects on the reported impotence of Devereux and declares that women, by contrast, are 'oftener able for ten, than insufficient for five' (2.3.42–3).

It is worth mentioning here a lesser-known tragedy of the period which contains an even better example of the promiscuous (and murderous) woman: Isabella in John Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*. The text of the play may be uneven (it was left unfinished by John Marston and completed around 1610 by Lewis Machin and William Barksted), but it is nevertheless a fascinating document that has at its centre another, more extreme (near-parodic) representation of female sensuality. Roberts believes that the play may have been written (perhaps in its resumed form) with Frances Howard in mind, although the evidence seems flimsier and more conjectural than it is for other plays discussed here. Having said that, it is worth noting that the play was reprinted in 1616, the year Frances Howard confessed to her complicity in the murder of Overbury (Roberts 1998, p. 167), and that may not be coincidental. Isabella clearly has little or no control over her own sexual desires. 'My heart's on fire, and unto mine eyes / The raging flames ascend' (2.1.113–14), she declares when she spies Guido at the banquet celebrating her marriage to Roberto. Two scenes later, she tells the audience: 'My blood,' (and the sexual connotation of the word is clearly in play), 'like to a troubled ocean / Cuffed with the winds, incertain where to rest, / Butts at the utmost shore of every limb' (2.3.42–4). Her seduction of Rogero in this scene brings to mind the Duchess of Malfi's wooing of Antonio: 'Courting is not befitting to our sex', she blushes, in what seems like a performance of coy modesty (2.3.80). Like the Duchess, Isabella is recently widowed and in search of a new partner, but her dialogue with Rogero has none of Webster's sweetness or tenderness. Isabella has sexual relationships with four men before her career is cut short, and she is beheaded by a vengeful patriarchy. 'She died deservedly', the duke of Medina concludes; 'and may like fate / Attend all women so insatiate' (5.1.228–9).

Female sexuality is strictly policed by the patriarchy. This is readily evident in the conditions of the annulment of Frances's union with Robert Devereux: only if their marriage is unconsummated may she entertain any hope of a divorce. In *The Changeling*, a central scene (4.1) reveals that Alsemero has in his medicine cabinet a potion that he intends to use to test whether or not Joanna is still a virgin. It is a very striking manifestation of this male obsession with exercising control over female sexuality. When Joanna discovers the potion in question,

she plots a way around the test. First, she confirms her maid Diaphanta's status as a virgin: 'Then dare you put your honesty / Upon an easy trial?' she asks her; this line, and Diaphanta's aside, 'She will not search me, will she, / Like the forewoman of a female jury' (4.1.96–9), are unmistakable references to the Howard affair. Then Joanna notes Diaphanta's reactions to the potion and replicates them precisely when Alsemero runs his tests on her. Finally, via the familiar early modern dramatic convention of the bed trick,[11] she manages to maintain the illusion of her maidenhood by sending Diaphanta in her place to her marriage bed on her wedding night and then arranging Diaphanta's murder to cover her tracks.

It is impossible to miss the link between the gynaecological inspection Frances was subjected to and the more fanciful test Joanna undergoes. Five matrons and two midwives carried out the examination on Frances and confirmed that she was a virgin, and that she was physically able to have intercourse and bear children. The fact that she chose to wear a veil during the inspection led inevitably to suspicions that it was not *her* body that was inspected; Arthur Wilson insists that 'another young gentlewoman, that had less offended, was fobbed into the place; and she passed, in the opinion both of jury, and judges, to be a virgin' (1653, p. 68). According to Weldon, 'One Mistress Fines, near Kinswoman to old Kettle, was dressed up in the Countess's clothes, at that time too young to be other than (*virgo intacta*)' (1817, p. 25). D'Ewes reports that he had heard 'one of Sir Thomas Monson's daughters was brought in to be searched in her place, and so both jury and judges deceived' (Halliwell 1845, pp. 357–8). As Lindley notes, such accounts are typically coloured by misogyny: for Weldon, 'Frances Howard cannot be a virgin (he's heard the evidence of the Overbury trial, besides which it is impossible that any court lady of nineteen can have preserved her virginity)' (1993, p. 111).

Images and distorted facts: Frances as malicious woman

I have established that suspicions about Frances cast doubt in the minds of many over the genuineness of her claim that her marriage to Essex had never been consummated. I have also explored some aspects of her reputation in terms of her sexuality. However, there is another aspect of Frances that so far I have only touched upon: her capacity for malice, her appetite for murder, and her supposed dealings with witchcraft. Anthony Weldon, Simonds D'Ewes and William Sanderson all shared the belief that Frances was possessed of a malicious, spiteful

and vengeful nature, and see her as the prime mover behind the death of Sir Thomas Overbury. Sanderson in particular sees Overbury as the victim of a vengeful woman: he notes his attempts to dishonour her, 'For which', he writes, 'the malice of women (as it often meets) sought revenge by poison to punish him to the death' (cited in Scott 1811, p. 221). Lawrence Hyde remarks that the crime was the result of 'implacable malice, being the malice of a woman' (cited in Lindley 1993, p. 175). D'Ewes declares that 'there is no malice to the malice of a woman' and writes of Frances's 'deadly hate towards Overbury', and how she became 'much more revengeful, especially because he had taxed her with a bad name. For truth is hateful to the evil, and what before she concealed now breaks forth with fury', he concludes (cited in Halliwell 1845, pp. 365, 361). As Lindley argues, an act of revenge perpetrated by a man could be seen as a matter of honour; female revenge is 'a mark of dangerous excess' (1993, p. 177). In this respect, the Howard case bears a resemblance to coverage of the murder of Meredith Kercher, and the prosecution's emphasis on Knox as a leading figure in the attack, playing up animosity between Kercher and Knox in the days leading up to the murder (see p. 165): there has always been considerable media mileage in the notion of a cat fight.

In addition to charges of malice and vengefulness, representation of Frances in the libels of the period chose to portray her as the seductress, the one who had, possibly by supernatural means, won the heart of the unwitting Robert Carr. For many writers at the time, Carr was 'a man led into a life of sin, lust and luxury by Frances Howard and then destroyed by her transgressions' (Bellany 2002, p. 166). Others swiftly followed suit: D'Ewes describes her as having 'a lustful appetite, prodigal of expense, covetous of applause, ambitious of favour, and light of behaviour' and he attributed the blossoming of the affair with Carr to her persistence in pursuing him. He believed Frances was as motivated by ambition as by lust, hoping Carr's rise to power in the glow of the monarch's favour would illuminate her own route to security and political influence. Most importantly, D'Ewes contended that Frances and her associate, the widow Anne Turner, turned to the wizard Simon Forman to help find 'the best way they may to enchant the Viscount's affection towards her': the implication was that potions had been employed. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola and Ferdinand debate whether 'some sorcery' has been used on the Duchess to make her fall in love. Though the duke pours scorn on the idea that 'there's power in potions, or in charms, / To make us love, whether we will or no' (3.1.67–8), Bosola is less sceptical; belief in such remedies was very common, and associated

with witchcraft. No doubt Frances's actions and eventual fate informed D'Ewes's judgement on evil women in general: 'for a woman's hands being once entered into the act of sin, runs headlong to her destruction', he declared (Halliwell 1845, pp. 340–1).

Frances Howard's alleged association with Dr Simon Forman is one of the most intriguing aspects of the accusations laid against her. Forman, an alchemist, astrologer and physician, had a reputation built on mystery and fear, and had set himself up as a so-called 'cunning man', or wizard (Somerset 1997, p. 89). One of his associates was Anne Turner, who may have been a childhood friend of Frances Howard's: certainly by the time Frances married Robert Carr, they were close friends, and Turner apparently lived in their household. Anne Somerset notes that Frances addressed her as 'Sweet Turner' and signed off, 'Your sister, Frances Essex' in correspondence between them (1997, p. 87). Simonds D'Ewes's description of Anne Turner is strikingly similar to his characterisation of Frances: she is 'in prodigality and excess most riotous, by which she had consumed the greatest part of her husband's means and her own, so that now, wanting wherewith to fulfil her expectations and extreme pride, falls into evil courses, and to practice sorcery and enchantment' (Halliwell 1845, p. 336). Once more, we are on a spectrum of behaviour: from excess, to overweening pride, to misdeeds, to evil.

Forman had built up a prestigious list of clients by the time he came into contact with Frances Howard, who first sought his aid in her attempts to capture the attention of Robert Carr. Her letters to him suggest that she quickly came to rely on Forman, addressing him in a letter as 'sweet father' and signing off, 'your affectionate loving daughter' (White 1965, p. 32). There was some speculation that she enlisted Forman's help not only in exciting Carr's passion for her, but in bringing about the opposite effect in relation to her husband. Some of the most comprehensive early chronicles of Frances's life offer precise detail about the latter. Arthur Wilson's scathing account of her progress deplores her obstinate disobedience to her father and declares: '[She] did use all the artifice his [Forman's] subtlety could devise, really to imbecillitate the Earl [Devereux]; [...] all inward applications were foisted on him by corrupted servants to lessen and debilitate the seminal operations. Which *veneficium* [poisoning] is one great part of witchcraft' (1653, pp. 58–9). Wilson also claims that Frances Howard acquired 'an artifice too immodest to be expressed, to hinder penetration' (p. 59).

At the time the divorce, or nullity suit, was being pursued, a rumour had surfaced that Frances had enlisted the help of a wise woman, Mary Woods, in an attempt to poison Robert Devereux, although this was

soon discredited. Nevertheless, the association between Frances and witchcraft undoubtedly lingered – Anne Somerset believes that it had become 'a universal assumption' that she had 'resorted to witchcraft to render the Earl of Essex impotent' (p. 353) – and it returned with a vengeance at Anne Turner's trial. According to D'Ewes, Weston's confession under questioning spoke of 'how Mrs. Turner and the Countess became acquainted, [and] what relation she had to witches, sorcerers, and conjurors' (cited in Halliwell 1845, p. 404). At this time, it was not unusual for people of all social classes to pay men and women such as Forman, understood to have insights into fate and the future, to cast figures for them. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio (of whom it would be fair to say a more straightforward chap one could not hope to meet) has a horoscope divined on the birth of their first child (2.2.80–1). However, this is shadowy territory, and Lord Justice Coke worked hard to whip up fear and hostility in the courtroom by insisting on links between Frances, Anne Turner and Simon Forman, offering a series of 'magical writings and images' that Turner and Frances had allegedly commissioned from Forman, including an image of a man and a woman engaged in sexual intercourse. According to the prosecution, the purpose of these images had been to enchant Robert Carr and to render Devereux impotent. One account even represents the two women as having consulted the Devil directly before employing Forman (Bellany 2002, pp. 149–51). David Lindley also cites a contemporary report which notes that, as these exhibits were shown, 'there was a crack from the scaffold, and such a fear, tumult, confusion and cry amongst the spectators, and in the hall every man fearing hurt, as if the devil had been raised among them indeed' (1993, p. 148). It is a useful reminder of a mind set crowded with superstition and fear. Bellany remarks that, in a culture that saw a profound continuity between poisoning, witchcraft and sexual deviancy, 'Frances Howard's and Anne Turner's propensity for witchcraft [...] fit nicely with their representation as whores' (2002, p. 154). As Bellany argues, there is a strong overlap between the familiar cultural trope of the corrupt court, and the idea of the lustful and promiscuous woman who inhabits it.

How could they ever mistake you: *The Witch* and *The True Tragicomedy*

It should come as no surprise that occult connections became part of the mythology that accumulated around Frances, and we find the accusations everywhere in the libels, but also in the drama of the period.

I will end this study of Frances Howard with a short discussion of two intertexts which were, if anything, too topical. Although it is hard to be certain, both *The Witch* and *The True Tragicomedy* may have owed their lack of success, or their tumbles into relative obscurity, to the fact that they cut too close to the bone for their topicality to be passed over. Thomas Middleton's play *The Witch* is an uneven tragicomedy best known to early modern literary scholars today for featuring two songs and a dance that appear in the Folio edition of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The critical consensus is that the excerpts originated in *The Witch*, and that Middleton might have been motivated to lift passages from that play for his revision of *Macbeth* by the failure of his own play, possibly on account of court intervention set off by exposed nerves around the Essex affair.[12] Corbin and Sedge believe that the internal evidence suggests the play was written around the same time as some of Middleton's other works which have more secure chronologies, *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1615) and *A Fair Quarrel* (1616), which would place it around the time of the divorce case (1986, p. 14). Ann Lancashire (1983), who believes that *The Witch* dates from 1611, argues that the play was so blatant in its references to the divorce scandal that it ran into trouble with the censor, and that its failure can be attributed to its dangerous topicality.

The Witch tells the story of Sebastian and Isabella, contracted to marry, whose plans are thwarted when Isabella is instead given in marriage to Antonio during Sebastian's enforced absence, fighting in the wars. Isabella vows to free herself of her unwanted husband, but meanwhile Sebastian calls on the services of the witch Hecate to provide him with a potion that will render Antonio impotent. However, the charm is designed to have a quite specific effect, one that will prevent him from consummating his marriage, while leaving his relationship with the prostitute Florida unaffected. At another point, the character of Almachildes expresses wonder at the power of the witches' concoctions: 'They say they have charms and tricks to make / A wench fall backwards and lead a man herself / To a country-house some mile out of the town/ Like a fire-drake' (1.1.91–4).

The rest of the play does not concern us here, although it is worth pointing out that the character of the Duchess, who in a conspiracy to murder her husband tricks a character into having sex with her and then threatens to accuse him of rape unless he helps her with her plot, is a stereotypical 'lustful woman and bold murd'ress' (5.3.81). Furthermore, just as Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* is prepared to admit to conspiracy to murder but not unfaithfulness (though she is guilty of

both), so it goes with the Duchess, who claims, 'Blood I am guilty of / But not adultery, not the breach of honour' (5.3.102–3). The difference between the two is that, in Beatrice-Joanna's case, she has committed adultery with her servant De Flores; the Duchess in *The Witch* has in fact remained chaste: though Almachildes believes he did have sex with her, he was not aware that a prostitute had taken the Duchess's place in their encounter (yet another appearance of the bed trick convention, and perhaps another reminder of Frances's own supposed act of substitution at her gynaecological inspection).

Francis Osborne's play *The True Tragicomedy* dramatises the events in the Frances Howard affair from the morning after her first wedding night to her second marriage to Robert Carr. Lois Potter, editing an up-to-date printing of the play, is unsurprised that it had had a chequered publishing history, given the fact that the work was 'guaranteed to offend readers of every political party in the mid-seventeenth century', its uncompromising depiction of King James being 'particularly scandalous', with its Machiavellian portrait of a monarch keen to advocate homosexuality as an effective form of birth control (1983, p. xvi). The play is free and easy with chronology (it focuses on the events of 1613, but Simon Forman is still alive in the world of the play, even though he died in 1611).

The play, tedious as much of it is, at least gives us some indication of how the image of Frances Howard had evolved some 40 years after the scandal, and 23 years after her death. The play depicts Frances as sexually experienced and fond of much erotic punning with Anne Turner. Indeed, as Lois Potter notes, virtually all the other female characters in the play are 'almost as sexually insatiable as Frances' (1983, p. xxxiv). The first lines Frances speaks in the play are in reply to an associate's enquiry after the events of her wedding night the previous evening: 'Leave gibing', Frances replies; 'you know I am no virgin, though / I might live and die one for any account / Essex is able to make to contradict it' (1.4.4–6). Anne Turner's appearance prompts a tiresomely extended riff on Devereux's impotence ('proving as barren as a rock which produceth nothing but moss and pumice' is one of her many choice phrases [1.4.71–2]). It is suggested that Frances contrived a trick involving a strategically placed blood-filled packet to try to convince Devereux of her virginity (1.4.29–37). Later, Frances complains to the character of the 'Conjuror' (Forman) that she has been thrown into 'a bed so much the more loathsome because emptied of all performance', and she is left frustrated, 'replenished' as she is 'with as strong desires as ever filled the panting heart of lovers' (2.2.38–41). One metaphor

casts Frances very clearly as Eve to Carr's Adam: 'I could not but smile to see how like a ser- / pent you wriggled about him, whilst he stood gaping at the apples of your eyes, not seeming / to value paradise in comparison of them' (4.1.147–50). Osborne has Frances suggesting that 'a virgin [...] be found out to supply my place in the scrutiny they intend to make' of her 'maidenhead' (4.2.57–9), and Turner promises to procure 'a simple-headed changeling' in order to bring her plan to fruition (4.2.170). In fact, Osborne chooses to portray Turner as a kind of pandar, though she does at one point turn down Carr's offer of money for engineering a meeting between him and Frances (2.8.36–42).

In sum, Osborne's play is a rather grubby piece of work. There is some voyeuristic commentary on the inspection of Frances's body which is intensified, as Lindley remarks, by having the event recounted by servants peeping around the door, and having the inspectors as male, when we know that was not the case (1993, p. 112). Anne Turner is gossipy and shallow; Frances herself is a cypher, and there seems to be very little to her apart from her sexual appetites, which are elaborated on endlessly. Osborne brings a history of misogyny in treatments of Frances to a fittingly, depressingly misogynistic conclusion.

Drink up your blood like wine: Punishing the transgressive woman

And yet we have not quite reached the end. Some of the accounts of Frances's life, in particular those keen to paint her as the epitome of court corruption and dangerous womanhood, kept their most vicious comments for her sad final days. Drawing another line from the real life (and death) of Frances Howard to the fictive women who populated the early modern stage is useful here, and to do so I will return briefly to some of the plays I have discussed earlier in this chapter.

In early modern tragedy, as in the culture, the punishment of women for sexual transgression is a familiar trope: in the wider culture and social structures of the time, assertive women are aberrations associated with witchcraft, and subjected to the ducking stool or worse; shrewish wives were on occasion paraded, muzzled with the scold's bridle, in the streets like animals. In the imaginative space of the theatre, very often the punishments reserved for transgressive women are particularly violent; often they carry sexual overtones. So, in *The Duchess of Malfi* we eavesdrop on Ferdinand's hellish, sexually charged, sadistic plans of punishment for his wayward sister: he rants of 'mak[ing] a sponge ... of

her bleeding heart' (2.5.15) and threatens to 'hew [...] her to pieces' (2.5.31). Most explicitly, at the climax of this raging scene, he cries: 'Go to, mistress! / 'Tis not your whore's milk that shall quench my wild-fire, / But your whore's blood'(2.5.46–8). His final vision in this scene is of stringing whips with scorpions to chastise her for her betrayal of their royal lineage (2.5.78). Blood is central to the way he perceives her crimes, as well as the necessary punishment and redemption. In *The Changeling* Alsemero locks his wife and her lover in a closet together to keep them prisoner until he can assemble his witnesses. From inside, we hear the orgasmic death cries of Beatrice-Joanna. When the door is opened and she falls out of the closet onto the stage, blood streams from the wounds De Flores has inflicted upon her. In *The White Devil*, Vittoria meets her death at the end of an assassin's sword, defiantly crying, 'I will meet thy weapon half way', then mocking her killer for his 'manly blow'; 'The next thou giv'st, murder some sucking infant', she mocks, 'And then thou wilt be famous' (5.6.228–30).

Frequently the death of the transgressive woman is seen as a necessary act of purgation. In Ferdinand's mind, his bloodline has been contaminated by the Duchess's union with someone of lower birth: 'Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in 't, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul' (4.2.121–3); his brother rages, 'Shall our blood, / The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted?' (2.5.21–3). The same threat arises in *The Changeling* as a result of the relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores. Transgressors such as the Duchess of Malfi, Vittoria and Beatrice-Joanna are seen to pollute the purity of the blood of the aristocratic body and, according to the logic of this ideology, they purge that body of its pollutants by their deaths. What is more, these women tend to internalise the judgements men pass upon them: as Vittoria dies, she cries, 'O, my greatest sin lay in my blood! / Now my blood pays for it' (5.6.235–6). Beatrice-Joanna similarly locates the pollution in blood that she acknowledges as belonging to her father:

> Oh, come not near me, sir; I shall defile you.
> I am that of your blood was taken from you
> For your better health; look no more upon't,
> But cast it to the ground regardlessly.
> Let the common sewer take it from distinction.
>
> (5.3.149–53)

These women see their punishments, and specifically their bleeding out, as fitting their crimes, and necessary for the purification of the family body. By dying, Beatrice-Joanna purges the body of her family from its disease: herself. Beatrice White gives an account of the attorney Sir Lawrence Hide's attack on Frances as he fired the opening salvo in Weston's trial. Among many other things, he called her 'a dead and rotten branch, which being lopped off, the noble tree, meaning that noble family, would prosper the better' (White 1965, p. 113); the connection with Joanna's dying speech is clear, whether it be linked just conceptually – and so coincidental – or else a deliberate echo. Frances, of course, never recovered from the Overbury scandal, and the way conclusions drawn from it were cast back into a retrospective view on her union with the disempowered and now disgraced Robert Carr.

I mentioned above that one of the rumours that circulated in the wake of the release of the Carrs from the Tower of London was that Frances developed a gynaecological problem that prevented her from having sex. Anne Somerset speculates that it may have been complications following the birth of their daughter, but also muses that it may have been early symptoms of the cancer that eventually killed her. In any case, her end was a terrible one, and one that her former husband, Robert Devereux, seemed to take a particular interest in: a copy of her autopsy report was found among his papers (Somerset 1997, pp. 439–40). The autopsy revealed a tumour in the right breast; the cancer had also destroyed her uterus. It was an end that, predictably, a man like Arthur Wilson took a particular pleasure in imagining, setting it down in lurid detail. Perhaps it was his way of staging what he saw as a poetically just death, like Vittoria's, like Beatrice-Joanna's. Having escaped execution, from Wilson's perspective, Frances could not escape God's judgement. The passage demands a lengthy quotation.

> She died before him. Her death was infamous, his without fame, the obscurity of the rest of his life darkening the splendour of it. And though she died (as it were) in a corner (in so private a condition) the loathsomeness of her death made it as conspicuous as on the house top: for that part of her body which had been the receptacle of most of her sin, grown rotten (though she never had but one child) the ligaments failing, it fell down, and was cut away in flakes, with a most nauseous and putrid savour; which to augment, she would roll herself in her own ordure in her bed, and took delight in it. Thus her affections varied; for nothing could be found sweet enough to augment

> her beauties at first, and nothing stinking enough to decipher her loathsomeness at last.

Wilson has the hypocrisy to conclude, 'Pardon the sharpness of these expressions, for they are for the Glory of God, who often makes his punishments (in the balance of his justice) of equal weight with our sins' (1653, p. 83). For Wilson, then, Frances's agonising death is an opportunity to display the mysterious workings of an apparently just God. Just as the once defiant Vittoria is made to speak the misogyny of her killers as she dies – 'My greatest sin lay in my blood, / Now my blood pays for it' – so Frances is imagined judged and punished for her promiscuity. In Wilson's sadistic pornography, Frances's supposed depravity is amplified in the most obscene terms ('which to augment, she would roll herself in her own ordure in her bed, and took delight in it'), and works once more on the axis of beauty and disfigurement, virtue and evil ('sweet' and 'stinking', 'beauties' and 'loathsomeness'). Furthermore, her imagined fate, though not spelled out, would have been obvious to seventeenth-century readers. Denied the penitent words of a Vittoria, an Anne Turner, or a Beatrice-Joanna, eternal damnation is the inescapable implication.

Conclusion

Alastair Bellany claims that '[t]he Overbury affair virtually begs the historian to play Philip Marlowe, to stalk the corridors of Whitehall and the Tower, chronicling the corruption, exposing the double-crosses, dodging the wiles of crooked politicians and femmes fatales'; he believes that the scandal 'is the nearest we can come to Jacobean noir' (2002, p. 8). The connection with a pop culture format – the *noir* novel – is suggestive on a number of levels. First of all, it bridges the historical gulf between Frances Howard and Ruth Snyder, the focus of the next chapter: Snyder has been immortalised most familiarly in novels generically very close to those written as vehicles for Raymond Chandler's private detective Philip Marlowe: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* and their film adaptations. Secondly, it hints at the way in which the Overbury scandal shifted the story from the relatively rarefied atmosphere of the court to the wider public arena. This was not a scandal confined to the walls of Whitehall, but one that fed a populace eager to hear about the scandals of royalty and the aristocracy at a time when patience with a corrupt monarchy was fast running out.

There are elements here which we will see replicated in the stories still to come: those of Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox. The physical examination Frances underwent to establish her virginity echoes through my case studies: the psychological testing to establish whether or not Ruth Snyder was prone to erotomania; the AIDS test carried out on Amanda Knox, and the associated questioning of her sexual history, which would later be used to support the representation of her as a woman of unusually voracious sexual appetites. It is also worth noting in passing that although it was Frances who petitioned for an annulment on the basis that Devereux was impotent, the burden of proof fell upon her, not him: it was Frances who submitted to the medical examination in order to show the marriage had never been consummated. As ever, sexual guilt tarnishes the woman, not the man.

The idea of the trial as a theatrical spectacle is not a new one, but it is also telling that each of the trials discussed in this book is represented in specifically dramatic and theatrical terms by contemporary commentators. Outrageous prices were paid for seats at the Overbury trials: 'as much as £10 for two, and £50 for a small corner' (White 1965, p. 145). Since £1 in the early seventeenth century is equivalent to approximately £100 today, one can understand the disappointment of those who lined up to witness Frances's trial, only to troop out again less than two hours later, their expectations of watching a 'devil in crystal' exposed by Lord Justice Coke disappointed. In the figure of Frances Howard as she would have appeared to the wider world, we can see a number of different elements of early modern constructions of the supposed nature of women coming together, in particular those aspects associated with deviancy and sexual licence: in radical departures from the normative, idealised image of the faithful, obedient, silent spouse, the portrait of a dangerous and seductive *femme fatale* emerges. Subsequent chapters will illustrate how this pattern has been replicated across history.

3
Ruth Snyder (1891–1928)

> Her eye ruled me. I tried to look away. I couldn't. I was helpless to resist anything she bade me do.
>
> – Henry 'Judd' Gray

The murder of Albert Snyder

Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray were convicted of the murder of Snyder's husband Albert in Queens, New York, in May 1927 and were executed in January 1928. The case was a news sensation at a time when the tabloid was in the ascendant; the *New York Daily News*, which would publish one of the most famous and controversial images in the history of photojournalism – Ruth Snyder dying in the electric chair – was the best-selling paper in America at the time, but even the broadsheets regularly featured the Snyder-Gray case on their front pages as it progressed through arrest, trial, sentencing and execution. The photo printed on the front page of the *Daily News* on Friday, 13th January 1928, boosted its circulation by half a million that day, but the coverage of the trial throughout was extensive and particularly notable for the frenzy inspired by the spectacle of an adulterous woman on trial for the murder of her husband. The tabloid papers elaborated a narrative of Ruth Snyder as a sexually magnetic woman who had cast a spell over Judd Gray, effectively hypnotising him into the conspiracy to murder her husband.

Magazine editor Albert Snyder and secretary Ruth Brown had married in 1915: he was 32 and she was 23, though she claimed to be 19 (MacKellar 2006, p. 22). Two years later, their daughter Lorraine was born. According to some accounts, Snyder was a difficult husband, often neglectful of his daughter and abusive to his wife. He was also a

heavy drinker. Set against Ruth's strong will, it was a recipe for a deeply unhappy marriage. In 1925, Ruth met Henry 'Judd' Gray, a married man working as a travelling corset salesman, and they soon embarked on a long-running affair. In 1927, Ruth arranged a new 'double indemnity' insurance policy for her husband without his knowledge, a policy which would pay twice the standard agreed amount in the event of a death by misadventure. She organised to pay the premiums on the policy herself, keeping Albert in the dark about the arrangements.

In the spring of the same year, Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray laid their plans for Albert's murder, and on 19 March they put them into action. With Albert drunk and sleeping deeply in his bed, together they attempted to drug him with cloths soaked in chloroform, then hit him over the head with a sash weight[1] and garrotted him with picture wire. After throwing their blood-stained clothes in the basement furnace, they staged a burglary, remarkably ineptly: Lorraine found her mother with her feet tied but her hands free; she had feigned unconsciousness but a cursory medical examination revealed no evidence of a blow to the head. In addition, jewellery Ruth pretended had been stolen was discovered by police stuffed under the mattress. Within 24 hours, both Snyder and Gray had offered confessions. She abandoned her tale of being robbed and tied up by 'two Italian-looking men', choosing instead to blame Gray who in turn attempted to pin the murder on her. They were tried together, found guilty, and executed, within minutes of each other, at Sing Sing Prison, New York, on 12 January 1928.

The press coverage was unprecedented for such a case. Reportage of the arrests, trial and execution was dominated by the tabloid newspapers, especially the *New York Daily News* and *New York Daily Mirror*, although the story also featured regularly in the quality press. By this time the distinctions between the coverage offered by the likes of the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune* and the tabloids was beginning to blur, and while the broadsheets remained 'the more sober and informative', all newspapers, to varying degrees, had been obliged to recognise that they had to 'entertain as well as inform their readers' (Ponce De Leon 2002, p. 47). The *Daily News*, which often printed several editions a day, offered something not too dissimilar from today's rolling 24/7 TV and internet news coverage, and included regular surveys of its readers' opinions about the crime and especially about the prospect of the execution of a woman; the *Mirror* counted down the final days with instalments of Ruth's own story, purportedly smuggled out of prison (but actually ghost-written by celebrated journalist Jack Lait from interviews he had held with her some time before). April Miller writes

that '[o]ver 180 reporters from across the nation were assigned to cover the case', and she quotes a contemporaneous article in the *Evening Post* which reported that approximately 1.5 million words about the Snyder story had been filed on press wires by 5 May 1927 (2011, p. 74). One commentator at the time mused: 'It is not because they were so different from their neighbours, but so much like them [...] that their story had been read with absorption by the multitude' (*Outlook* 18 May 1927, cited in Marling 1998, p. 150).

It is perhaps no surprise that a case of this nature provoked such intense scrutiny, as well as widespread debate. The extent to which the crime and its aftermath – a respectable woman on trial for her life for the murder of her husband – scandalised the American public can be illustrated by the fact that the jury selection was protracted to an extraordinary degree. More than two of the six volumes chronicling the case for the Court of Appeals are taken up with transcripts of the process. The stumbling blocks to establishing the necessary neutrality of the jurors (or 'talesmen') were, first, a prejudicial attitude to the case (chiefly on account of the press exposure) and, secondly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Snyder's gender. The judge was well aware of the danger when he warned potential jury members that they needed to be sure they could proceed without showing any 'favouritism or partiality by virtue of that fact alone' (i.e. that Ruth Snyder was a woman) (Court of Appeals 1927, p. 1013). After all, a guilty verdict could send a woman to the electric chair.[2] While it was not unprecedented, New York State had only two previous records of electrocuting women convicted of murder, in 1899 and 1909 (Margolin 1999, p. 258). The *New York Times* reported that 50 men were examined and all were rejected on the first day, 'said to be a record for a single day in a criminal trial'. Thirty-one of them were rejected 'because they had formed opinions as to the guilt or innocence of the defendants' (*NYT* 24 March 1927a, p. 1).

The sensational aspects of the Snyder-Gray case probed a number of exposed cultural nerves, including anxieties about drinking (New York was a defiantly 'wet' city in the Prohibition era), sexual promiscuity and rampant consumerism. It also raised the spectre of the 'new woman' and what dangers she might pose to husbands and the stability of the family unit. In the media coverage the case attracted there was also a significant degree of speculation about female criminality, given the brutal nature of the murder and its domestic setting. In addition, the intriguing complication of an insurance scam textured lust and shocking violence with sheer material greed. Jessie Ramey's study of the press coverage notes parallels with the infamous O.J. Simpson trial in

1994–95, with the difference that the Simpson case provoked debates about race, while at the heart of the Snyder case was the discourse about gender in America in the 1920s (2004, p. 627). As so often when there was a male and a female perpetrator, the reporters focused intensely on the woman involved. At the centre of it all there was always Ruth Snyder, or rather, the various contested Ruth Snyder *personae* that would populate the press reports, and haunt the *femme fatale* stories that would emerge in the years following her death.

The woman in the case

As with the Amy Fisher case 65 years later, and the Madeleine Smith case almost exactly 70 years earlier, the key figures slipped easily into roles that were familiar from all kinds of societal, literary and pop-cultural sources. John Kobler remarks:

> The pattern was threadbare in Eden; the principals emerge as types rather than individuals [...] And yet from all this, this commonplace ruin of three commonplace figures – the wife, the husband, the lover – emerge variations on a classic theme not without interest to murder fancier and student of human nature alike.
>
> (1938, p. 2)

Moreover, the tabloids often structured their coverage to read like the narrative of a serially published story ('For more details of this amazing tragedy, read tomorrow's Pink and other editions of THE NEWS' [*NYDN* 25 March 1927Fb, p. 6.]), or as a drama: 'When the doors [...are] thrown open at 10 o'clock this morning, the curtain will be raised on one of the best murder trial thrillers New York has witnessed in years' (*NYDN* 25 April 1927, pp. 3, 1). The focus on Snyder was intense from the very beginning, and not only in terms of news coverage. Indeed, the press interest seemed merely to reflect the way in which the general public responded to the extraordinary case and its circumstances. One report in the *New York Daily News* noted how crowds gathered in the courtyard outside the prison, and cars congested the street that provided a view of Snyder's cell window. During one of her fleeting appearances, waving to the crowds below, she provoked such an intense reaction from those waiting to catch a glimpse of her that a serious car accident was caused, with four people hospitalised (*NYDN* 16 May 1927, p. 2).

As was the case with Madeleine Smith (see pp. 35–6) and as would prove to be the case with Amanda Knox (photographers would 'stand on chairs and jostle on ladders to get the best view of Amanda coming in' to court [Nadeau 2010, pp. 125–26]), Snyder's physical appearance was a preoccupation for the press, which did its best to satiate the public's keen appetite for photographs of Snyder the celebrity criminal. Reports of the trial were often accompanied by sketches roughed out by court artists and the captions reinforced a particular image: 'Note here the cruel mouth of the woman who calmly plotted the murder of her husband with her secret paramour' is typical (*NYDN* 24 March 1927P, p. 3). As well as her hair, her eyes (another frequent theme in the Knox coverage – see pp. 46–7), were often remarked upon. They seem to have had a peculiarly protean quality: The report that described her 'cruel mouth' also referred to 'Cold, clear eyes and an emotionless mask of a face' (*NYDN* 24 March 1927P, p. 3), while another declared that, when they looked at a juror, they were 'not cold' but 'melting and lovely' (*NYDN* 19 April 1927F, p. 3). A week later she was 'the frozen-faced blonde with the edelweiss eyes' (*NYDN* 26 April 1927, p. 3) and, in the *Herald Tribune*, her eyes were 'like ice' when she responded to aggressive questions (*NYHT* 3 May 1927, p. 16). Once again, Medusa rears her lethal head.

Figure 3.1 A frequently-reproduced shot of Snyder taken in her twenties

Figure 3.2 Photograph of Snyder taken during the trial (*NYDN* 25 March 1927, p. 1)

The tabloid reports frequently published photographs of Snyder on the front page, sometimes considerably enlarged; the *Daily News* would cover entire pages with galleries of shots, or of older photos of Ruth, Albert and their daughter Lorraine. The tabloids were particularly fond of those images that showed a younger, slimmer, more conventionally attractive Ruth Snyder than the one who was by then behind bars (compare Figures 3.1 and 3.2). A number of the contemporary shots appear to have been carefully posed. One such picture, featuring Snyder with her lawyers, was taken during the jury selection process and appeared on the front of the *Daily News*; taking up virtually the entire page, it was accompanied by the headline, 'Mrs. Snyder Vamp' (*NYDN* 19 April 1927E, p. 1).

Journalists also displayed great attention to detail when describing the clothes and jewellery Snyder wore. One of the earliest reports for the *New York Times* detailed her outfit ('muskrat coat [...] serge dress [...] green turban [...] gray silk scarf' [*NYT* 24 March 1927a, p. 6]), while a piece in the *New York Herald Tribune* described her necklace

and remarked: 'The manner in which she wears her jet necklace has started a fad for long jet strings in Queens' (*NYHT* 2 May 1927, p. 4). Ahead of the first court date, the tabloids offered a detailed description of Ruth's wardrobe choices in a manner akin to that for a celebrity, red carpet event:

> Mrs. Snyder is expected to make an impressive appearance in court. She will be attired in widow's weeds, a black silk dress, a black broadcloth coat, black shoes and stockings, and the ensemble topped by a chic black silk turban of the latest style.
>
> (*NYDN* 18 April 1927b, p. 4)

The preoccupation with her appearance would even extend to what she was expected to wear at her execution, specifically whether she would be allowed to replace one of the cheap washable calico dresses bought for her by the prison authorities with her own silk dress; the request was denied (MacKellar 2006, pp. 300–1).

Snyder's bobbed haircut, in flapper style, also drew the attention of reporters and commentators. There were countless references to the colour of her hair – she was characterised as a typical 'bottle blonde' – and reporters tracked the progress of her couture through her incarceration, right up to her final day. The trial took place amidst the noise and speed of the Roaring Twenties; as Ruth and Judd sat in court, America was just over two years away from what F. Scott Fitzgerald would identify as the end of the Jazz Age – a leap to a 'spectacular death' in the form of the Wall Street Crash (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 312). William H. Chafe suggests that 'there was a substantial amount of evidence that a revolution in morals and manners had occurred in America' by the beginning of the 1920s (1991, p. 105). Women born after 1900 were twice as likely to have had premarital sex as those born before (Snyder was born in 1895). Furthermore, statistics indicate that extramarital sex also increased in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to Chafe, 'The sexual habits of the flapper generation indicated that many women had been emancipated from conventional patterns of behavior' (p. 105), and these shifts in morality, particularly in terms of sexual practices, had not gone unnoticed. Contemporaneous debates about Prohibition also fed into the cultural cross-currents that buffeted the media discourse, opinion pieces and readers' letters about the Snyder-Gray case, as people struggled to come to terms with this eruption of sex and violence in a respectable middle-class Queens suburb. One way to rationalise the aberration was to identify Snyder as a flapper and to tie into the

story all the negative connotations of loose morals and hedonism that the word implied (her husband's sister described her as 'man crazy' [MacKellar 2006, p. 322]). According to Michael A. Lerner, 'As part of her independent and unconventional nature, the flapper of the 1920s [...] developed a taste for alcohol, and the cocktail became a motif as central in her popular depiction as bobbed hair, short skirts, and rolled stockings' (2007, p. 173). Rachelle Bergstein suggests that the murder story 'spoke to mounting fears about the Jazz Age's effect on motherhood, with Snyder as the grisly embodiment of family life shattered by female sexuality' and that '[a]lmost immediately, she became the national bogey-woman' (2012, p. 15).

Linda Rosenzweig writes that 'in the aftermath of World War I, the "flapper" replaced the "new woman" as the focus of social commentary and anxiety regarding female behavior' even if this new figure was 'a fictionalized composite image rather than a description of reality' (1993, p. 169). The so-called new woman had arrived some years earlier, dedicated to suffrage and the feminist cause; in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave women the vote. Although Snyder herself would almost certainly not have chosen to ally herself with the feminist movement, for commentators at the time, her willingness to defy her husband, to dominate and manipulate her lover, and to take part in such a violent crime amounted to evidence sufficient to damn her in such terms. Between 1867 and 1929 the divorce rate in the US had multiplied twenty fold (Jones 2003, p. 41). Jennifer Jones suggest that the attack on the American home was perceived at that time as an attack on the nation itself, hence the degree of attention the Snyder-Gray case drew: 'Ruth must be convicted, not to avenge her husband but to restore balance to a world caught in the flux of gender confusion' (p. 42). The caption for an early picture of Snyder in the *Daily News* is indicative: 'Hard boiled? Defiant? Do you see here a revolt against the decencies of domestic life?' (*NYDN* 24 March 1927P, p. 3).

Ruth Snyder herself belonged in fact to a slightly older generation than the so-called flapper: in her early thirties by the time she began her affair with Gray, she hardly qualified as a flapper in the common understanding of the term – certainly not in terms of her age or marital status. However, just as Fitzgerald noted in his wry essay on the Jazz Age that '[b]y 1923 [the] elders, tired of watching the carnival with ill-concealed envy, had discovered that young liquor will take the place of young blood', so Snyder seemed to sign up for what the author of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) characterised as 'a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure' (p. 313). She established a reputation as a woman known to drink and to enjoy male company. And in having a long-running

affair, she challenged the sexual mores of the period, blatantly transgressing the rules that had governed women's sex lives up to this point. The prosecution chose to depict the Snyders' failed marriage in conventional terms: Albert was the 'old-fashioned type' finding 'his enjoyments and pleasures in his home and with his family', Ruth preferring 'more life and gayety [*sic*], and not getting it from Albert Snyder she sought it elsewhere' (Court of Appeals 1927, p. 1118). In casting husband and wife in these roles, the narrative was contextualised by what rapid social change had effectively opened up into a generation gap, with Albert, ten years Ruth's senior, clinging to traditional nineteenth-century morality (and conventional ideas about marriage and the family), and Ruth catching hold of the flying coat tails of the Jazz Age. As she admitted in an interview with the *New York Daily News*, 'I was fond of a good time, lots of jollity in life, and parties' (*NYDN* 22 March 1927F, p. 3). According to the *New York Times*, 'Her smile is said to have been her greatest asset in the days when her dash and her gaiety won her the nickname of "Tommie"' (*NYT* 24 March 1927a, p. 6). The male nickname was attributed either to her flapper-style hair, or to the impression others formed of her as 'a good fellow' (Marling 1998, p. 151); one might say the modern equivalent phrase would be 'one of the boys'.

Ruth Snyder was transformed from respectable suburban housewife into a character altogether more dynamic and transgressive. By contrast, Judd Gray was seen as unremarkable, weak, and unworthy of the public's attention, except in so far as he could be defined in contradistinction to Snyder. Descriptions of the couple that reversed the standard gender stereotypes of active male and passive female, such as 'the frosty blonde murderess and her cringing little corset salesman' (*NYDN* 10 May 1927, p. 3), became commonplace. Numerous accounts suggest that Ruth possessed a charismatic quality that drew attention to her like a magnet in the courtroom, an element that would become central to the idea of the *femme fatale*. 'I have heard newspapermen debate furiously over Ruth's qualifications as an appealing female,' Kobler remarks; 'In the end, each man admitted that his appraisal was governed by the impact of her sex appeal on his particular libido. Of that useful commodity Ruth unquestionably possessed a full measure' (1938, p. 7). One reporter declared that 'Mrs. Snyder is generously endowed with the quality which Eleanor Glynn [*sic*] calls "it"' (*NYDN* 19 April 1927Fb, p. 4), and while Elinor Glyn's 'It Girl', epitomised by actress and sex symbol Clara Bow, fitted the tabloid version of Snyder in one respect, a crucial distinction needs noting: Glyn's definition of the 'It Girl' includes the key ingredient of 'entire un-self-consciousness, and indifference to the effects she is producing [...] Conceit or self-consciousness destroys "it" immediately'

(Glyn 1927, p. 53). Whether or not Snyder was aware of her appeal, the majority of reports were convinced that she was, and that she had very deliberately manipulated Judd Gray, seducing him into the plot to murder her husband.

Snyder herself seems to have been bewildered by the press attention, and unprepared for the self-censorship that was necessary if she were to stand any chance of avoiding prejudicial reporting. One brief report is indicative for its note that, as the photographer set up, her lips parted in a smile, and she pleaded, 'Don't take any pictures now [...] Don't make [*sic*] any of me laughing' (*NYDN* 24 March 1927F, p. 4). In John Berger's terms (see pp. 43, 46), she was, in a very acute sense, both the surveyed and the surveyor, and while she initially found the press attention somewhat flattering, as the trial began in earnest, her attitude shifted. The *New York Daily News* reported her as desperate to convince the jury that she was not the 'jazz-mad woman she has been painted' (*NYDN* 10 April 1927, p. 3).

Her prison diary perhaps reveals a moment of self-alienation when she reflects on the image of her the press was constructing. 'I am a million miles from being pretty,' she protested; 'I'm not even passably good looking – never was and from my recent trouble, never shall be!' (*NYDM* 10 January 1928a, p. 3). Knox would experience a moment strikingly similar and record it in her diary (see p. 145). Sometimes aware of the potential for negative publicity, at other points Snyder seems to have been oblivious, and dazzled by the limelight. The Sunday edition of the *Daily News* on 15 May 1927 ran a brief story headlined 'Ruth Giggles, Calls from Jail Window': ' "Oo-hoo!" she called to reporters from a window of the jail. Then she giggled, her laugh being audible to them three stories below' (*NYDN* 15 May 1927, p. 4). In another sign of the interest in her personally, the *New York Herald Tribune* reported on 1 May 1927 that she referred to the letters she received as 'fan mail' and that 'yesterday it reached forty-two letters for the day. She is described as being amused by several written proposals of marriage' (*NYHT* 1 May 1927, p. 7).[3]

William Marling suggests that two Ruth Snyders were in circulation from early on in the coverage of the case. On the one hand, she was hard-working, a good cook and a loving mother, a frugal householder who sewed her own curtains and clothes for herself and her daughter. On the other, she was one who cared 'only for booze, gambling, Broadway shows, movies, and men' (1998, p. 151). Ramey takes a different tack: focusing on the latter of Marling's two *personae* and ignoring the defence's counter-representation, she categorises the media

representations of Snyder as either the 'Bloody Blonde' (a very striking prototype of a *noir femme fatale*) or the 'Marble Woman' ('lacking all proper feminine emotions') (2004, p. 627): one could say, the hyper-sexualised dangerous woman, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the de-sexualised, unnatural monster.

The confusing array of *personae* that these scholars have crystallised from their surveys of the case is indicative of the remarkable series of incarnations Snyder passed through in the reports from court and prison, from vulnerable victim to vicious harpy. Even before a word was spoken at the trial, the *Daily News* gloried in Snyder's response to the rumour that Gray had had another affair during his relationship with her: '[she] turned with all the ferocity of a wounded tigress at bay and denounced her paramour as a cringing coward and a human jackal' (*NYDN* 16 April 1927, p. 3). However, the two contrasting Ruth Snyders were never far away from each other: the *Daily News* ran a headline covering her cross-examination, 'Sashweight Melts Frigid Blonde' (*NYDN* 27 April 1927, p. 8), and suggested that she and Gray 'seemed to reverse their personalities' at this point in the trial. Here and elsewhere, the implication seems to be that the tough exterior was inauthentic in some respect, and that the core beneath the icy shell could be exposed, melted away by the heat of the prosecution's cross-examination, uncovering the vulnerable, weak, 'natural' female beneath. As I will show, the sense of competing, mutually incompatible versions of Snyder would modulate as the trial proceeded, and particularly as the date of Snyder and Gray's execution drew near. The spectral Ruth Snyders that would emerge in the years and decades following – in drama, fiction and film, as well as 'true crime' versions – would partake of aspects of all of these different impressions and images. As so often, the picture that emerges is a collage of patriarchal fantasy and anxiety.

Theatre of justice

The 1920s saw rapid growth of a performance culture in the US, especially although not exclusively in urban centres. In New York City, while vaudeville and burlesque (increasingly flirting with female nudity) retained a strong foothold during the decade, Broadway also witnessed the gradual emergence of a more serious, realist drama pulling alongside the familiar popular entertainment and stage musicals. Andrew Harris believes that '[n]ever before or since has there been a decade that could equal the 1920s' in terms of Broadway's commercial success, with 76 legitimate theatres in operation (Harris 1994, p. 2), and

many more venues for revues, burlesque and movies. It may be that the conspicuousness of theatre culture in New York had something to do with the extent to which a sense of drama and performance suffused the stories about the trial in the press. One of the journalists who attended the trial, Sophie Treadwell, wrote a striking expressionist play inspired by the Snyder-Gray trial called *Machinal* (see pp. 131–8, below). The case also connects with a very familiar, much revived and adapted drama about murderesses, *Chicago*, subsequently turned into a musical and in 2002 into a major Hollywood film. Although the characters of Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly in Maurine Watkins' original play were based on two other notorious figures, Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner, and although it premiered a year before Albert Snyder's death, Watkins covered the Snyder-Gray story for the *Telegram*, accompanied to court by the production's female lead Francine Larrimore (MacKellar 2006, p. 112). Among the other celebrities noted in the public gallery were the filmmaker D.W. Griffith ('studying the faces of the defendants and taking notes throughout the day'), who declared an interest in making a film about the case, and theatre producer David Belasco, who called the case 'my idea of great drama'; in a taste of things to come, the same report noted a number of cameras being smuggled into the courtroom to record the occasion (*NYT* 26 April 1927, p. 2).

A *Daily News* headline declared 'Snyder Trial Seat Demand Like Theatre' and reported that the courthouse had been deluged with requests to reserve pairs of tickets (*NYDN* 13 April 1927, p. 4). As the trial proceeded, one *Daily News* article compared the proceedings to a circus and cast Snyder as one of its animal attractions, imagining a barker calling out to the swelling crowd, 'Right this way. See the tigress lady fighting fo-ah her life!' (*NYDN* 30 April 1927b, p. 4). The report refers to clothing being torn in the scramble into the courtroom's public gallery, and even recounted a near fatal accident when a woman was pushed halfway over a railing by the pressing crowd, almost falling to her death before being rescued. As the trial reached its climax, there were reports of fake tickets being sold (*NYDN* 8 May 1927b, p. 3) and Kobler claims that spectators were paying as much as $50 for them. Furthermore, 'At ten cents apiece hundreds of miniature sash weights, mounted on stickpins, were sold' (Kobler 1938, p. 56). In this particular performance of the processes of law, order and justice – 'this thrilling matinee' as one reporter called it (*NYDN* 30 April 1927b, p. 4) – many journalists noted the sense of theatrical occasion, comparing the 'spectators' in the gallery to 'a typical Broadway audience, sophisticated and cynical' (*NYT* 30 April 1927, p. 11). One report laid out for its readers the cast of characters in the courtroom, listing them as the 'dramatis personae, in

order of appearance' (*NYDN* 30 April 1927d, p. 8). Furthermore, interpretations of the key players, Ruth and Judd in particular, frequently deployed theatrical metaphors. Snyder's lawyer Edgar Hazleton was 'the haranguing, collar-tearing, hair-mussing, finger-wagging lawyer of the typical drama' (*NYHT* 30 April 1927, p. 7). According to the *Daily News*, the 'onlookers' themselves 'persisted in referring to the afternoon's testimony as drama, and to Mrs. Snyder as the central character in the play' (*NYDN* 30 April 1927b, p. 4).

Some reports emphasised the performative element of Ruth's appearances in court, with heavy implications of manipulation and deviousness, key characteristics of the *femme fatale*: 'Mrs. Snyder did not weep enough to impair her appearance', remarked one; the same reporter noted 'She wept three times', and itemised each occasion. Again, the subtext suggested that these were carefully planned and rehearsed (*NYT* 30 April 1927, p. 11). 'At exactly the same point where she broke down in going over the murder story the first time, Mrs. Snyder was apparently overcome by emotion yesterday', remarked another sceptical journalist (*NYDN* 3 May 1927b, p. 6). As she spoke of the murder of Albert Snyder, 'she broke down completely – wept and sobbed bitterly, while her graceful frame shook with what purported to be emotion' (*NYDN* 30 April 1927a, p. 3). As with Frances Howard (see p. 77), observers were quick to assume a performance rather than genuine emotion.

Ruth's behaviour during Gray's testimony (glaring, narrowing her eyes, shaking her head, wrinkling her face in an expression of rage) was described as 'vigorous pantomime' by the *Times* reporter (*NYT* 28 April 1927, p. 14). The *Tribune* coverage is particularly fascinating for its emphasis on the trial as a performance, and the framing of the protagonists as characters, with references to costume, settings and stage directions. According to its reporter, Snyder had three distinct voices: 'a husky snarl that is accompanied by eyes like ice' when goaded by questions; 'the notes of her voice rise high and she spaces her words carefully' when challenged over the truth of her statements; and, when 'speaking of her child Lorraine, or when she speaks of matters unimportant to the trial, there is a curious, electric quality to her voice that is gripping and magnetic. It is soft and throaty and soothing' (*NYHT* 3 May 1927, p. 16). Once again, the description is offered in such a way as to present Snyder as an actress, modulating her voice in accordance with what she understood was required to fit the mood of the moment.

The ideation of Snyder as transgressor of moral norms inevitably cast her as the sexually dominant manipulator of her 'putty man' Judd Gray.

As with Frances Howard and Robert Carr, and Amanda Knox and Rafaele Sollecito, the temptation was to assume the male coming under the spell of the *femme fatale*. Ann Jones (1991) believes that the notion of Gray as, effectively, another of Snyder's victims, came from the police detectives: it is they, she suggests, who 'first found Gray such a likable fellow and passed on to the public as fact his story that he had been bewitched and dominated' (p. 275). Snyder made one attempt to portray Gray as a womaniser ('The women in his life! And he reads the Bible! What a fantastic liar' [*NYDN* 16 April 1927, p. 4]), but to the press, and presumably the public, and as with Knox and Sollecito (see pp. 154–5), it never seemed as plausible or as satisfying as the paradigm of the temptress and the dupe: a paradigm that would become central in *noir* fiction and film. Gray's defence team argued that, 'on his own, Judd Gray was an upstanding, law abiding, red blooded American male', his 'only flaw' being his weak will (Jones 2003, p. 44). As I will show in due course, the same idea of Snyder as the stronger partner dominates many of the retellings of their story in the novels and films that would follow: it was here, in the earliest casting of the roles of weak-willed man easily led astray and powerful, sexually precocious, manipulative woman, that the *femmes fatales* of James M. Cain and others were first engendered.

Judd Gray's legal team worked hard to create the impression of Ruth as the Eve who had led her normally God-fearing Adam astray: 'Gray's lawyer said yesterday that the man was irresponsible and that the disintegration of his mentality was due to his association with Mrs. Snyder' (*NYT* 24 March 1927, p. 6). In Gray's testimony, he repeatedly cast Snyder as the instigator of both their drinking bouts and their lovemaking, particularly in his testimony of time they spent together in October 1926 when she accompanied him on a business trip upstate (covered in depth by Kobler 1938, pp. 262–72). Gray spoke of evenings drinking and nights with very little sleep that left him dazed and exhausted (the spectre of the insatiable woman returns): Snyder apparently complained about their motel rooms being furnished with single beds ('an old married man's honeymoon'), and she would push them together (p. 264). Gray also emphasised her desire to go out dancing despite his reluctance, and her urging him to come to bed (p. 269). Elaborating on his theme, Gray would detail her 'complete physical domination over me', characterising her as a form of *succuba*, with all that implies in terms of sexual demands and favours: 'Her power seemed to draw every strength out of me' (*NYDN* 1 April 1927, p. 3).[4] He painted a picture of himself as hopelessly ensnared by Snyder's charms: 'Ruth – Ruth – Ruth – he was powerless in her grasp. Her long white arms

reached out and her slender forefinger beckoned to him', read one report of his testimony. 'It was Ruth's magnetism that held him for two hours in the Snyder home, awaiting the arrival of his victim, and Ruth's spell that sent him on a mission collecting murder tools' (*NYDN* 6 May 1927, p. 3); the fear of witchcraft is residual in the rhetoric, even if we are a long way from the superstitions of the seventeenth century. Gray even went so far as to present Snyder as little more than a prostitute, claiming she would pay him for introductions to travelling salesmen, who would then pay her $200 or $300 to 'entertain' them (*NYDN* 25 March 1927Fb, p. 6).

As with Knox, from an emphasis on her apparently overpowering, irresistible sexuality, it was an easy move to identify Snyder as the prime mover behind the murder itself. Gray claimed that he had 'absolutely refused at first to be a party to' killing Ruth's husband, but that 'with some veiled threats and intents of love-making, she reached the point where she got me in such a whirl that I didn't know where I was at' (Court of Appeals 1927, p. 1431). Gray's lawyer Samuel L. Miller described him as 'undermined mentally and physically by years of unnatural relations with Mrs. Snyder, and dominated by her super-will' (*NYDN* 30 April 1927c, p. 6). William Millard, also acting for Gray, likened Snyder to 'a poisonous snake, a poisonous serpent [that] drew Judd Gray into her glistening coils' from which there was 'no escape'. He continued: 'This woman, this peculiar venomous species of humanity was abnormal; possessed of an all-consuming, all-absorbing sexual passion, animal lust, which seemingly was never satisfied' (Kobler 1938, p. 302). Millard declared: 'It was a pitiful tragedy when these two met, and the purely physical fire of Ruth Snyder condemned them both' (*NYDN* 6 January 1928, p. 3). The characterisation of Snyder as insatiable rehearsed a familiar stereotype of female sexuality that I have already discussed in relation to Frances Howard (see p. 72), but one that by the nineteenth century had become associated with working-class women and prostitutes: as Pamela S. Haag puts it, 'middle-class ideology [...] upheld a dichotomy between public women who, de facto, performed sexual labor and wives whose sexuality was safely inscribed in the private realm, if acknowledged at all'; Haag asserts that '"unconscious" [and therefore uncontrollable] sexuality' was 'increasingly ascribed to the "vulgar" classes' (Haag 1993, pp. 164–5). In this context, just as the unmarried Madeleine Smith's sexual relationship was seen as unnatural and associated with prostitution (see p. 35), so Ruth Snyder's passion, and her seduction of Judd Gray, was seen as debased, abnormal and animalistic.

Indeed, as matters proceeded, and the case against the couple built a frightening momentum, the legal teams cast around for other possible escape routes, and both explored the options of pleading insanity. A report in the *Daily News* noted: 'Alienists are observing both Ruth and Judd for symptoms of erotomania, an excessive interest in sex matters' (*NYDN* 21 May 1927, p. 7). According to MacKellar, Snyder's lawyer Edgar Hazelton attempted to secure the services of a distinguished psychiatrist from Chicago's North Western University in order to build a case that his client was an 'erotomaniac': an insanity plea would have ruled out the death penalty (MacKellar 2006, p. 273). The attempt failed when state officials refused to allow the specialist, Clarence Neymann, to speak to Snyder. Regardless, Millard went on to plead for clemency for Gray specifically 'because his mind was not operating freely because of the sexual excesses in which he indulged with Mrs. Snyder' (*NYDN* 6 January 1928, p. 3). In the appeal against the sentence, both teams of lawyers tried to plead insanity: however, while Snyder's was characterised as 'symptoms of epilepsy', in Gray's case, it was a case of 'strange subjugation to "another world", dominated by Mrs. Snyder' (*NYT* 6 January 1928).

For the most part, the press enthusiastically reported and endorsed Gray's version of Snyder as a powerfully manipulative woman who had corrupted and damned him. 'In this sordid affair the woman appears to have been the dominating influence', agreed the *New York Daily News* (*NYDN* 24 April 1927, p. 3). The same paper decried Snyder as a 'modern Jezebel' (*NYDN* 18 April 1927a, p. 3) and dismissed Gray as 'the meek little man who says he was her love-slave' (*NYDN* 28 March 1927, p. 3). The *Times* concurred: 'He did it because he was not a man, but a mere engine under the control of another [...] He was a pawn in her hands [...] a Robot, a hypnotic subject, a merely physical organism, expertly operated by the will of another' (*NYT* 5 May 1927, p. 23).

The discourse mobilised by William Millard in his closing argument – that of the sexually insatiable woman as *succuba* – was very much of a piece with the dominant attitudes at the time. Carol Groneman notes how ' "[e]xcessive" female sexual behaviour continued to arouse suspicions of disease and disorder' at the beginning of the twentieth century. 'Wives were encouraged to participate fully in marital sex, and yet too sexually demanding wives might sap their husband's vital energy' (Groneman 2000, p. 42) – precisely the kind of figurative language employed to describe Snyder's control over Gray. One extraordinary opinion piece written by actress, celebrity and legendary shopper Peggy Hopkins Joyce for the New York *Daily Mirror* exclaimed: 'This putty

man was wonderful modeling material for the Swedish-Norwegian vampire.' Joyce even imagined Snyder 'kissing her lover and sash-weighting her husband to death almost simultaneously', fusing the sex drive and the death drive of the *femme fatale* in one bizarre image, the beautiful Medusa turned deadly. She appealed to her readers' stereotypes and preconceptions when she noted: 'You know women can do things to men that make men crazy. I mean, they can exert their influence over them in such a way that men will do almost anything for them' (all cited in Kobler 1938, p. 55). One report in the *New York Daily News* in particular lingered over the details of the affair, referring to the 'remarkable record of seventeen love trysts' and snidely noting: 'No matter what Mrs. Snyder's neighbours in Queens Village may be saying about her now, they can never say she is not a thorough woman.' The reporter took this as 'vindication' of his, and others' judgement, that 'the famous blonde [was] one of the world's most passionate women' (*NYDN* 26 April 1927, p. 3). The *New York Daily News* had even relished the reports of 'Mrs. Snyder leaping from bed in a towering rage and a short slip when arrested'. The same bulletin noted that she had dress[ed] brazenly before detectives had time to leave the room' (*NYDN* 22 March 1927F, p. 3).[5]

For many reporters, Snyder's power was not restricted to her control over her former lover; the *Daily News* suggested that '[t]he comely blonde [...] is eager to try on the jury the lure that made Snyder and Henry Judd Gray slaves to her every whim' (*NYDN* 2 April 1927, p. 3).[6] It was even suggested that the principle of justice itself was at stake, besieged by the dangerously seductive beauty of one woman: 'All day yesterday at Long Island City courthouse, the august institutions known as law and order battled an elusive, fascinating influence embodied in the person of one Mrs. Ruth Snyder, confessed slayer' (*NYDN* 19 April 1927Fa, p. 3). In these terms, Ruth was a good fit for one particular current model of female criminality elaborated by Hargrave Adam:

> There is some indefinable personal magnetism about certain women which seems to completely subjugate the will of certain men. Personally I feel quite convinced that some women wield hypnotic influence over men. And it is invariably a malign influence.
>
> (Adam 1914, p. 11)

Gray gave a detailed description of how she would hypnotise her with his eyes, and slap his cheeks with the palms of her hands: 'Her eyes ruled me. She gained complete physical and mental domination over

me. [...] I was helpless to resist anything she bade me do' (*NYDN* 1 April 1927, p. 3).

Against the tide, Snyder and her legal team did their best to counter the portrayal of her as a manipulator, and as a woman who used her sexuality to lure and then control Gray. As the *Times* reporter noted, 'If Mrs. Snyder is able to prove good character and industrious housewifery up to and even after meeting Gray, it meets to some extent at least the contention that it was "a serpent" and "a fiend in human form" who entangled and destroyed the previously excellent Gray' (*NYT* 24 March 1927b, p. 21). Gray's attempt to 'shunt [...] responsibility for the death of Albert Snyder onto the shoulders of his blonde paramour' was recognised by at least one reporter as 'the world's oldest alibi, originating in the Garden of Eden', under the headline, 'The Woman Tempted Me' (*NYDN* 5 May 1927, p. 1). However, Marling suggests that Gray's representation of Snyder as a 'Tiger Woman' was a turning point in coverage of the trial, 'allow[ing] the press to focus widespread anxieties about changing sexual mores. [...] This was an old-fashioned, newspaper way of organising changing gender roles for ideological intelligibility' (1998, p. 149). Even some contemporary reporters recognised the bias in the coverage. 'All the cruel, bitter terms that can be applied to an illicit love affair were hurled at her over and over', wrote one in the *Daily News* (*NYDN* 3 May 1927a, p. 3). In the face of such an onslaught, Snyder was helpless.

The marble woman crumbles

A close look at the evolution of the coverage over the course of the trial and beyond reveals the extent to which representations of Ruth Snyder shifted, sometimes gradually, more often suddenly and drastically, depending on the events in court or the progress of the appeals. When the trial began, the reporters claimed, she seemed composed and confident: 'Her self-control was almost complete', reported the *New York Times*, and she repeatedly 'swept the courtroom with a defiant gaze of her blue eyes' (*NYT* 26 April 1927, p. 2). This was Ramey's 'marble woman' construct, and it carried over into some more lurid reconstructions of the murder itself. As early as the time of her arrest, the *Daily News* alleged that '[s]he seemed coldest when relating the most gruesome details of the murder' (*NYDN* 22 March 1927F, p. 3). One report compared her with 'a modern lady Macbeth': 'Shakespeare's iron woman said, when her husband started to balk at his task, "Give me the knife – I'll do the bloody deed" '. The same article relished Gray's accusation

that 'his blonde inamorata [...] "got very much excited"' as she joined in the attack on her husband, implying a disturbing connection between violence and sexual arousal (*NYDN* 28 April 1927, p. 4): the same connections would be made by both the prosecution and the press in reportage of the murder of Meredith Kercher. Meanwhile, the representation of Ruth Snyder as a Fury continued unabated at this point in the trial coverage. The following day, the paper imagined Snyder 'in a flaming rage' confronting 'her wilting lover on the witness stand', when it predicted she would 'hurl at him the ugly name of "liar"' (*NYDN* 29 April 1927, p. 2). As it turned out, their forecast was wide of the mark: 'Ruth's marble face crumbles' was the subheading of the report the next day. Another, headlined 'Threatened by slayer, sobs widow', suggested that Snyder tried to present herself as the victim (*NYDN* 30 April 1927b, p. 4), contradicting the 'Tiger Woman' stereotype deployed by Gray's defence team.

As the trial proceeded, a growing ambivalence became evident in the press's understanding of Snyder's capacity for violence. The shift seems to hint at an ideological fault-line, with the initial determination to identify her as the chief instigator and/or perpetrator in the attack on her husband beginning to waver. While earlier coverage attempted to make the image fit by suggesting an authentic, more brittle woman behind the steely mask, now the impression was of a split personality. A story in the *New York Daily News* reported that, *Miss Julie*-like, Snyder had been unable to kill chickens in her own house, a job she left to her mother: 'So squeamish she couldn't stand seeing a chicken killed, and yet so cold-blooded she could see her husband murdered by her lover and even assist in the murder, according to her own story' (*NYDN* 23 March 1927P, p. 7). Often, the stories would hinge around this apparent split between the traditional construct of the woman (weak, fearful, dismayed by the enormity of her crime) and the aberration: 'She weeps, this woman of callous soul and unruly passions. But is it remorse or fear for her own fate?' (*NYDN* 24 March 1927P, p. 3). In the cross examination that picked over apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in her testimony, there were further signs of a collapse: 'This ordeal seemed to break her spirit. [...] Her voice became faint and broke pathetically as she sought to reconcile the peculiarities of the story. She looked up as if asking quarter, but she received none' (*NYT* 4 May 1927, p. 17).

It was not until after the verdict and the sentencing that the tabloid coverage abruptly inverted many of the binaries and stereotypes that it had established: now Ruth was the stereotypical woman, mentally

destroyed, helpless and damned for her sins – and Gray became the stoic male, reconciled with his saviour and resigned to his fate. Appearing before Justice Scudder for sentencing, the *New York Times* found that Snyder '[s]poke in a faint, broken voice', touching her eyes with a handkerchief from time to time and looking to her lawyer for guidance (*NYT* 10 May 1927b, p. 21). This was a profoundly different Snyder from the one that had been projected. She is much closer to the pensive, repentant Frances Howard at her trial, and to the Amanda Knox that emerged after she was sentenced, ragged, fragile and vulnerable. Meanwhile, tabloid headlines revelled in bizarre juxtapositions – 'Ruth Writhes in Epileptic Fit as Judd Eats Heartily after Hearing Verdict' (*NYDN* 10 May 1927, p. 3), and this remained the emphasis up to their deaths.

'Just a poor soul': Ruth by Ruth

And what of Snyder herself in the midst of all this? If the trial was a drama, she worked hard to script her own role in it, attempting to fashion a character at odds with the one created for her by the press. New York's *Daily Mirror* scored a point over the *Daily News* when they serialised her 'last story' in the days leading up to her execution. Billed as having been 'Written in the Death House Exclusively for Daily Mirror' (*NYDM* 6 January 1928a, p. 1), it is a curious mixture of self-justification, self-chastisement and a prolonged howl of innocence.[7] It is shot through with a religious fervour which strikes a rather forced, discordant note: 'My advice to men and women, young and old, is read your bibles and your prayerbooks!' (*NYDM* 6 January 1928b, p. 3). Among other things, Snyder announced she had prevented two previous attempts on her husband's life by Gray. She also made a number of efforts to portray her lover as a more powerful, and more frightening figure than the image that had come to dominate in the newspapers, describing his displays of 'murderous tempers' (*NYDM* 7 January 1928, p. 2) and claiming he had a serious drinking problem (*NYDM* 10 January 1928b, p. 4). She worked hard to challenge what she saw as the gross distortions of her own character in the media, rejecting the notion that she had (in sardonic upper case letters) 'SUCH SEX ALLURE' – 'I was only a plain, ordinary woman', she protested (*NYDM* 12 January 1928, p. 3).

Ironically, while it might have been reasonable to expect a prison diary to offer genuine insights, Snyder's bulletins reveal almost nothing. There are flashes, as when from time to time her thoughts ramble into incoherence: 'Why didn't J.G. [Judd Gray] examine his soul before he met me? DID I TAKE AWAY SOMETHING HE NEVER HAD – A SOUL?'

(*NYDM* 6 January 1928b, p. 3). However, most importantly (as Ann Jones points out), the serialisation of the diary enabled the morality play narrative to reach its logical conclusion: 'The final lesson of the Snyder-Gray drama was the lesson that had been taught to Ruth Snyder herself' (Jones 1991, p. 282). As one headline for a diary entry read, '"Go Straight!" Ruth's Advice in Chair's Shadow' (*NYDM* 6 January 1928b, p. 3).

The strategy deployed desperately by Snyder and her lawyers, then, was to build a *persona* the polar opposite of the one that had been circulating in the press. At the same time, she attempted to deflect blame for the crime itself onto Gray. In her version of the script, she was the victim, and she reverted to the traditional characteristics of femininity that were expected of her. There are critical moments during the trial where the gap between the *persona* she tried to portray and the one delineated in great detail by the prosecution (with regular elaborations courtesy of the feverish court reporters) opened so wide that decorum in the courtroom was disrupted by the response of the eager spectators (usually laughter): in the defence team's arguments, she was the God-fearing churchgoer, the neglected and abused wife, the good mother, the dutiful daughter (to 'Granny Brown', another high profile figure throughout the trial). In interview opportunities, she worked desperately to counter the image of herself that she was aware was circulating in the popular press. 'I love life and nature too much to hurt a living thing', she told the *Daily News*, speaking of the 'two dear little canaries' she kept at home (*NYDN* 25 March 1927Fa, p. 3). Asked in another interview whether she missed her husband, she responded, 'Yes, indeed – sometimes when it is half past five around here, how I do miss going home and making supper! You know I did all my own cooking and kept my seven-room house' (*NYDN* 18 April 1927a, p. 3).

The significance of Ruth Snyder as a maternal figure was key for the defence team and for Ruth herself; the attempt to keep her daughter Lorraine in the frame was part of the counter-spin to challenge the dominant image of her as a woman driven by sexual desire to abandon her moral duties as a wife and mother. Stories of Lorraine being left to ride the elevators in the hotel lobby while Snyder and Gray indulged in their passionate trysts had shocked the jury and the spectators at the trial, and had been made much of in the press. In the early days after her arrest, a journalist who managed to speak directly to Lorraine found her largely 'untouched by crime shadow [*sic*]' and, asking her if she wanted her mother back, received the answer, 'Oh, I don't care', before her grandmother intervened and prompted her with a more suitable response

('Sure I want mamma back') (*NYDN* 25 March 1927Fb, p. 6). As the trial wore on, Lorraine became increasingly central in shoring up the image Snyder wished to fashion of herself. Much was made of Mother's Day on 8 May, which fell between the end of testimonies and the closing arguments, with photo opportunities for Lorraine signing and delivering a card: 'This picture shows pitiful orphan of Snyder love-crime with the tender little remembrance destined for mother's jail cell', ran the caption in the *Sunday News* (*NYDN* 8 May 1927a, p. 1). Inside there was a picture of Lorraine with her grandmother under the headline 'Joy and Grief Crowd into Mother's Day' (*NYDN* 8 May 1927b, p. 3). The commentary reflected on what the day might mean to all the mothers involved in the crime – Snyder, her mother, as well as Judd Gray's mother and wife.

From the perspective of the newspaper reporters, editors and columnists, Lorraine could be deployed as they saw fit; for the most part, she was represented as the 'innocent victim' in the affair. In the earliest days of the coverage, she appeared under the headline 'Snyder Poison Plot' (*NYDN* 25 March 1927, p. 1); next to a full-length image of Ruth looking demure, Lorraine was pictured in the lap of her grandmother. On 25 April 1927, as the trial began, she was depicted praying in a full, vertical half-page photograph. The caption spoke of the 'innocent 9-year-old victim of tragedy' praying for 'the blonde with cold blue eyes who will play the lead in the drama opening in Long Island City court today' (*NYDN* 25 April 1927, p. 1). More often, the attempt to deploy Lorraine as a spur to encourage sympathy for herself failed or backfired: the *New York Daily News* report read: 'The swarthy, black-haired lover of Mrs. Ruth Snyder came to the witness stand . . . and tried to damn her, body and soul. He followed a slender, fair-haired child, Lorraine Snyder, who for a brief moment entered the sordid parade of lust and greed to try to save her mother, whom she loves' (*NYDN* 4 May 1927b, pp. 1, 3).

For the press, then, the attempt by Snyder and her team to use Lorraine either as a means to elicit sympathy, or to soften the image of Snyder that had developed – that of the icy blonde – allowed them to open up another front on the attack on ruthless Ruth: primarily, Lorraine was another victim of Snyder's terrible wrong-doing. However, the presence of the daughter figure also allowed reporters either to underline the extent of Snyder's moral turpitude, or else to emphasise her 'unnaturalness'. Furthermore, when the discourse around her strength and resolve began to turn, the little girl was crucial. According to the *Daily News*, it was Lorraine who finally broke her mother's façade of self-control. 'Mrs. Ruth Snyder's iron mask cracked under the strain of seeing her daughter', it reported. 'It was the first time she really lost her

iron composure. Her sobbing was audible in deep gasps as she looked at Lorraine, who was badly scared' (Anon *NYDN* 4 May 1927b, p. 3). Some time after the trial, Snyder once again drew on her daughter as part of an initiative to present herself as a true penitent: 'If I had my life to live over again', she told the reporter, 'I would want to be what I want my child to be – a good girl' (*NYT* 13 January 1928, p. 14).

Sentencing and execution

Towards the end, amidst appeals, rumours of clemency and an apparently growing conviction that she would survive (fostered in part by her lawyers' reluctance to be frank with her about her chances), the conflicting Snyder *personae* multiplied. Was she the abused wife and the vulnerable woman exploited by the opportunistic Judd Gray, or the penitent Catholic convert writing moral lessons for the edification of *Daily Mirror* readers? In the end, the jury, at least, chose Gray's story over Snyder's. The Foreman of the Jury confirmed in an interview with the *New York Times* that, while the jury members had all agreed verdicts of first degree murder for both, 'We all knew that Mrs. Snyder was lying', while 'We all believed every word that Gray said' (*NYT* 10 May 1927b, p. 21). However, although the jurors '[w]ere unanimous in believing that Gray had told the truth, [...] they could not see that it excused him' (*NYT* 10 May 1927a, p. 1).

In the final week leading up to the execution, it was perhaps no surprise to find the discourse that had previously polarised Snyder as the strong, controlled woman of ice and Judd as the weakling being reversed. Public opinion seemed to be lining up against Snyder in particular. Kobler reports that, in a bizarre twist, anonymous postcards were sent to each judge of the Court of Appeals as the legal teams fought to overturn the sentences. Each postcard warned them: 'We will shoot you if you let that woman Snyder go free. She must be electrocuted. The public demands it' (cited in Kobler 1938, p. 58). Reports on Snyder and Gray's journey from the Queens county jail to the death house at Sing Sing emphasised the 'sneers' of the crowds that gathered to watch them go by. ' "Hel-lo, Ruthie, how do you feel now?" and a hundred other sneering utterances arose' as they passed, according to the *Daily News*. The report mocked Ruth for screaming at the sight of a police officer unseated from his motorcycle as her car sideswiped his vehicle: 'A man was near death, and Ruth was touched and afraid for him. But when death threw its shadow across the bed of her husband, she kissed her lover', it mused (*NYDN* 17 May 1927, p. 4). In the final couple of days,

the editorial emphasis in the *New York Daily News* took something of a vindictive turn. A series of six images of Snyder, spanning a period from her younger days to a recent prison photograph, was titled 'From Light-hearted Days of Youth to the Valley of the Shadow'; one was captioned 'Ruth when she was considered a real blonde beauty' (*NYDN* 12 January 1928, p. 3).

Much of the tabloid coverage of the execution itself was freighted with heavy moral overtones. This from the *Daily News* on the day before her execution: 'Dressed in one of her old silk party dresses, the blonde who was once so beautiful she was talked about, will ride a thunderbolt to eternity.' While the final polling in the paper was in Snyder's favour (14,548 votes for clemency and 12,659 for electrocution), the paper also cited readers' letters blaming 'the rotten booze' and suggesting that the chair was 'too good for her' (*NYDN* 6 January 1928, p. 5). On the day of the execution, reporter Frank Dolan wrote: 'Once the gay, witty life of suburban bridge parties, "Tommy [*sic*] Snyder" moaned and twitched in her cell before the steady tramp of the guards came to signal her doom' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928a, p. 3). The same edition contrasted Ruth, who 'wept bitterly' when she heard all hope of a stay of execution had gone, with Gray's stoical response: 'I am ready' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928b, p. 4). In the final edition on the day after the execution, Dolan contrasted Snyder's poignant 'Ain't there anything anybody can do?' with Gray's 'I expected nothing more' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928Fa, p. 3). The same paper also made reference to Gray being 'fortified by his religion' (*NYDN*, 13 January 1928a, p. 3); Snyder, in her final hours, apparently sobbed, 'I am in the prime of my life.' The *Daily News* scoffed, 'Records do not clarify just what age she considers the prime of life' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928Fb, p. 6). The *Mirror* proceeded to set up a strong contrast between Gray and Snyder; under the headline 'Ruth Sobs as Death Nears; Judd Consoled by Bible', the report described Gray eating a lavish final meal while Snyder only gulped down a drink; Gray silent, Snyder garrulous; Gray calmly bidding the other male inmates of Death Row farewell while Snyder 'plunged about on her cot and rocked with sobs', crying out to her mother and sister to look after her daughter. According to Warden Lawes, while Gray 'feels and looks better than I do', Snyder was merely 'as well as can be expected' (*NYDM* 13 January 1928, p. 2).

As was the custom, the 'weaker' one was executed first. The *Sunday News* report had suggested that it was 'possible' Ruth might have to be carried most of the way from her cell to the execution chamber, 'Because her nerve has left her a broken woman who weeps hysterically,

rants at her guards and clutches at her cell bars and shrieks in abject terror as the moment of oblivion nears' (*NYDN* 8 January 1928, p. 2). While the reality did not match the lurid tabloid projections, the contrast between a strong and self-controlled Gray and the desperate Snyder continued. The *New York Times* reported that both were 'strong' when they entered the execution chamber, but noted that she cried 'Father forgive them', while he 'calmly repeat[ed] the beatitudes'. The emphasis was on Snyder 'sobb[ing] loudly' as she was seated in the chair; Gray, by contrast, was described as 'holding himself tense and seeming to overcome his terror by an exercise of the will' (*NYT* 13 January 1928, pp. 1, 14). The *Daily News*, meanwhile, dwelt on Snyder's physical appearance: 'The woman about to die presented a ghastly sight [...] Her face was pallid, haggard, sickening under the straight blonde hair which fell as straight as a whiskbroom below her ear lobes' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928Fa, p. 3). A Saturday recap of the story had her 'Stumbling and reeling from side to side, her eyes protruding', contrasted with a calm Judd Gray (*NYDN* 14 January 1928, p. 4). The *Daily News* also reported that 'she began to whimper' as the prison guards prepared to lead her to the chair: 'The sound was like the frightened whine of a little puppy' (*NYDN* 13 January 1928Fa, p. 3). In the staging of the punishment of the dangerous woman, it seems to have been a priority to reinstate the categories of gendered behaviour that had been so comprehensively disrupted by Snyder's crime and her actions and appearance in the months following (Figure 3.3 and 3.4).

The Snyder-Gray case probably remains most famous on account of the picture of Snyder dying in the electric chair. According to MacKellar's account, *New York Daily News* publisher Joseph Patterson hit upon the idea of smuggling a camera into the death chamber to take the picture of Snyder as the executioner, Robert Greene Elliott, threw the switch (MacKellar 2006, pp. 332–33). Thomas Howard was hired from the *Chicago Tribune* because the editors knew that if they tried to smuggle in a photographer as a journalist, he would be recognised by the other members of the press. Howard was able to pass undetected to take his seat in one of the witness boxes, the miniature plate camera strapped to his leg. At the critical moment, he pressed a plunger hidden in his jacket pocket which activated the shutter via a cable running down his trouser leg. He caught Snyder just as the second dose of electricity was administered, and the haunting photograph (Figure 3.4) was the result, for which Howard was handsomely rewarded (the camera itself now resides in the National Museum of American History).

Average net paid circulation of THE NEWS, Dec., 1927: Sunday, 1,357,556 Daily, 1,193,297

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

EXTRA EDITION

Vol. 9. No. 173 56 Pages — New York, Friday, January 13, 1928 — 2 Cents

DEAD!

Story on page 3

(Copyright: 1928: by Pacific and Atlantic photos)

RUTH SNYDER'S DEATH PICTURED!—This is perhaps the most remarkable exclusive picture in the history of criminology. It shows the actual scene in the Sing Sing death house as the lethal current surged through Ruth Snyder's body at 11:06 last night. Her helmeted head is stiffened in death, her face masked and an electrode strapped to her bare right leg. The autopsy table on which her body was removed is beside her. Judd Gray, mumbling a prayer, followed her down the narrow corridor at 11:14. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing?" were Ruth's last words. The picture is the first Sing Sing execution picture and the first of a woman's electrocution. Story p. 3; other pics. p. 28 and back page.

Figure 3.3 *New York Daily News* front page Friday 13 January 1928

Figure 3.4 The original uncropped photograph

The image published on the front page of the *Daily News* (Figure 3.3) was cropped and retouched. The original (Figure 3.4) is more distant, more blurred, and betrays the camera's low angle vantage point. In the 'Final' edition of the *Daily News* that day, the editors chose to include the original, uncropped photograph. The figure of Snyder is effectively in the background, off centre to the left, with much of the right hand side of the image dominated by the legs of a prison attendant and a matron; the figure of the priest John McCaffery is visible on the extreme right-hand edge. As the original caption notes, it is also possible to see the trolley which would convey Ruth's body to the autopsy room next door. The doctored version has much greater definition than the original, and the retouching has darkened the lines of Snyder's frame, as well as the fabric of her dress, the straps and the covering over her face. As with all those executed at Sing Sing, Snyder wore a leather mask with openings for her nose and mouth. Atop her head was the football helmet with its electrode attached, the helmet fastened tightly under her chin. This gives her face a disturbing and uncanny cast in the photograph. The blurring effect, which may have been caused by her body convulsing in the chair, or the shake of the camera on Howard's leg, or perhaps a combination of the two, also gives the picture a sense of dynamic motion, a shuddering ghost image of the killing of Ruth Snyder. Following the publication of the photograph, the prison authorities altered the lighting so that photography was impossible within the death house. The frosted lamps were replaced by 'glaring lights' that made the room 'picture proof' in terms of the technology of the day (Kobler 1938, p. 64). The *Mirror* reported that the ordeal of executing a woman in the electric chair had taken its toll on Elliott, the man who had thrown the switch: he was apparently 'so shattered by having to kill a woman he collapsed and was attended by a physician' (*NYDM* 14 January 1928, p. 2). Outside, however, a party atmosphere prevailed; an appropriately audience-oriented coda for such a theatrical trial. As with Frances Howard and the women that populate her intertexts, her death, which should have happened in the presence of a handful of witnesses, became a spectacle, a very public display of the fate of the transgressive female.

Ghosting: *Picture Snatcher* (1933)

The rapid expansion of tabloid press culture in New York in the second half of the 1920s did not go unnoticed by other elements of the media. A rash of films produced in the early thirties were based

around newspaper offices, notably *The Front Page* (1931, adapted from a successful stage play), *Five Star Final* (1931) and, a little later, *His Girl Friday* (1940). Often, the plots would involve or even revolve around the ethics of the press. A lesser-known film in this genre, *Picture Snatcher* (1933), provides us with our first Snyder intertext, and connects directly with the execution. *Picture Snatcher* was a James Cagney vehicle that cast its star as Danny Kean, an ex-convict trying to go straight, who lands a job as a photographer for a tabloid newspaper, and is given the job of covertly photographing the execution of a woman convicted of murder: the connection with Ruth Snyder is very obvious, and the newspaper Danny works for is the *Daily Graphic* – a title invented by amalgamating the titles of two real papers, the *Evening Graphic* and the *New York Daily News*.[8] When he hears of the upcoming execution, Danny first dismisses it ('I got better things to do than to watch some dame fry for knocking over her boyfriend'), but, spying a quick route up the ladder to the status of 'top notch' reporter, he accepts the challenge and wheedles his way into Sing Sing for the execution.

The sequence representing the prelude to the execution scene, the execution itself and its aftermath seems strikingly anomalous in what is a comedic drama defined by its high energy and predominantly light-hearted tone. The sombre atmosphere of the establishing shot of the cells is disturbed by Danny's arrival, as irrepressibly (and here inappropriately) chirpy as ever. In the next brief scene, a gaggle of three journalists exchange thoughts as they wait to be escorted into the death house and the tone begins to darken. One declares he would rather 'take a beating' than sit through an execution; another claims these things 'don't phase me at all'. The reporters file into the room in silence and take their places in the witness box, and we see the dark figure of the executioner – almost a silhouette (see Figure 3.5). There is a relatively long sequence during which we hear the rattle of chains – the audience may presume that the executioner is preparing the straps on the chair, but the positioning of the set does not allow us to see it. The camera pans across the serious, drawn faces of the journalists and the one who had before exhibited such blasé bravado is now mopping his brow; he leans forward to throw up, out of sight. At the sound of a door opening, and tramping feet, there is a close-up on Danny, his customary sunny expression clouding over. His brow fixes into a frown; the man seated beside him looks utterly devastated. The audience is invited to infer that the condemned woman is being strapped into the chair, but there are no voices or extraneous sounds. As the executioner prepares to throw the switch, the scene cuts to a close-up on Danny again, and a swift pan

Figure 3.5 From *Picture Snatcher*: Danny (James Cagney) is visible seated in the front row, neatly framed by the 'V' of the switch the executioner is gripping (screen capture)

down reveals he is getting ready to take the picture, with close-ups of the plunger switch in his hand and the camera strapped to his ankle. As the executioner pushes up and forward on the lever to send the electrical current to the chair, Danny shoots the photo as if he is firing a pistol, while his neighbour recoils. Danny glances across to see whether he has been noticed, and then his eyes dart back to the chair. There is a visible sigh of relief, although it is impossible to tell whether it is prompted by the execution being over, or by his successful attempt to take the picture undetected.

It is difficult to convey the oddity of the execution scene in the context of the whole film. *Picture Snatcher* may be Warner Brothers production line fodder (it is reputed to have been shot in 15 days), but the chill that comes over the movie in this short death house sequence is telling. In particular, it highlights the sense in which the original trial and execution worked as entertainment events: there is a similar reality gap between the witnesses of the state-sanctioned killing of Ruth Snyder, and the would-be spectators who gathered in numbers

outside the prison, perhaps hoping to hear a cry, or see a light flicker. Jennifer Jones discusses the atmosphere of public entertainment that seems to have surrounded the real event: audiences gathered, hot dogs and memorabilia were sold, and people cheered when the news of Snyder's death came through. Set against this was the perspective of a reporter who had witnessed the execution itself. Clearly shaken, he approached a fellow female journalist and asked her to walk with him: 'Talk to me about anything', he pleaded; 'My God, she looked so little.' The account (which seems to have been a source for the makers of *Picture Snatcher*) continues: 'Another man who had come out with him from witnessing the same scene vomited on the spot' (Ishbel Ross cited in Jones 2003, p. 47).

There is a remarkable degree of sensitivity (or squeamishness) in the depiction of the execution, and the scenes preceding it. We know from numerous reports that Snyder was not silent on her approach to the chair (and it is hard to imagine any execution passing off as silently as the one in *Picture Snatcher* does). She wept, sobbed, and cried 'Jesus, have mercy on me' as she was led to the chair, and 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' as she was strapped in (MacKellar 2006, p. 325). MacKellar also writes that the executioner cut her off in mid-sentence, in order to avoid the loud gurgling sound that would have been emitted if her lungs had been full of air when the electric shock hit her body. The film chooses to convey the horror of the moment purely via the expression on the faces of the witnesses: many of them wince visibly as the switch is thrown, and Danny's convulsion as he fires the camera shutter adds to the kinetic energy of the moment.

The film recovers its momentum and its lighter tone almost immediately afterwards. The camera is discovered as Danny leaves and a chase via car and underground train back to the offices of the *Graphic News* ensues. The front page picture he has taken, accompanied by the headline 'Chamber of Horrors!', is a fair replica of the original (Figure 3.6), although one of the victim's eyes is visible, staring back at the camera, which gives it a different impression from the actual photograph. It also lacks the original's eerie blur. Moreover, Danny's garbled, ebullient recollection of the execution, already far removed from the sombre depiction of the scene, is re-written on the fly by the female reporter Allison (Alice White): her act of transcription produces, via some alchemical process, an accurate pastiche of tabloid sensationalism: the kind of writing that framed the reportage of Snyder's crime to most of the public, and which followed her to her grave.

Figure 3.6 *Picture Snatcher*: Front page news (screen capture)

Tales told and retold

By Sunday, the Snyder-Gray story had disappeared from the pages of the *Daily News* to be replaced by the headline 'Maniac "Surgeon" Hunted' – the story of the murder of five-year-old Dorothy Schneider in Flint, Michigan (*NYDN* 15 January 1928, p. 1).[9] There was some muted coverage of their funerals, but the tabloids swiftly moved on in search of new quarry. However, the Snyder-Gray affair had been a human mythotype brought vividly to life, with updates several times a day at the most critical moments of investigation, trial, sentencing and execution. The allure of their story had been irresistible from the very beginning, as evinced by the depth, detail and tone of the press coverage. It would take ten years for the first comprehensive assessment of the case to be published: John Kobler's *The Trial of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray* (1938) provided a detailed chronicle of the trial, with much of the evidence reproduced verbatim. It is prefaced by a 67-page introduction in which Kobler allows himself plenty of space to offer his own assessment of the characters involved and the way the trial was conducted. His work was preceded by a number of accounts enthralled by the lurid nature

of the crime. Chief among these is Arthur A. Carey's *Memoirs of a Murder Man* (1930). Carey was a Deputy Inspector with the New York Police Department and approaching retirement when he attended the scene of the crime in Queens Village on 20 March 1927, and his chapter dealing with the Snyder-Gray case records his experience questioning Snyder on the morning after the killing.

However, the story of Snyder and Gray was also rapidly subsumed into the culture of the period, and over the next few years it provided the plots for several novels of which T. S. Matthews' *To the Gallows I Must Go* (1931) was probably the first. Matthews changed the names of his characters (the Snyders become Foster and Grace Haxall, Gray becomes bed salesman Todd Lorimer), but there is no mistaking the inspiration for his novel, which even replicates the unusual, half-bungled means by which Snyder and Gray committed the murder. Matthews' book today is largely forgotten, though two more novels that appeared in the years immediately following were to have a lasting impact both on hard-boiled fiction and on the *noir* film genre: James M. Cain was working at the *New York World* as an editorial writer at the time of Albert Snyder's murder and his two novels *Double Indemnity* (serialised 1935; published in book form 1943) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) both took their inspiration from the case. The novels were subsequently adapted for the screen (1944 and 1946 respectively). Though it was published before *Double Indemnity*, *Postman* was more loosely based on the Snyder-Gray source, told from the first person perspective of the Gray character, Frank Chambers, who falls for Cora, the wife of diner proprietor Nick Papadakis. Frank and Cora bungle one attempt on Nick's life before they manage to kill him and stage his death as a road accident. In the complex legal manoeuvres that follow, Nick and Cora (like Gray and Snyder) try to pin the crime on each other, although both end up being set free. After foiling a blackmail attempt, the couple seems to be on course for a happy ending, with Cora pregnant, and their enmities and betrayals behind them. However, in a final twist, an idyllic trip to the beach turns into a rush to the hospital as Cora fears a miscarriage; the car crashes, and Cora is killed. The novel ends with Frank (mistakenly and ironically) convicted of murdering her to capitalise on Nick's life insurance pay-out, and he finishes recounting his story as he awaits execution. *Postman* was adapted first for the stage in 1937; according to Thomas S. Hischak, although the film rights were sold, the erotic content of the novel was considered 'too sensational to get by the censors', and while French cinema adaptations *Le Dernier Tourant* (1939) and *Ossessione* (1942) followed,

Hollywood waited until 1946 to produce its own version (Hischak 2005, p. 209). A remake appeared in 1981, written by David Mamet and directed by Bob Rafelson, with Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson in the key roles.

For *Double Indemnity*, Cain took the plot lynchpin of the insurance policy and built the narrative of his novel around it: the Gray character is an insurance salesman named Walter Huff who falls for the wife of one of his clients, Phyllis Nirdlinger. Huff appears to be motivated as much – or more – by the challenge of committing the perfect, insurance-scamming crime as he is by Phyllis's charms; he is obsessed with ensuring their plan is watertight – 'Straight down the line' as the film version of his character, Neff, says to Phyllis when they first begin plotting. In fact, in both *Postman* and *Double Indemnity*, the Gray characters take great care over the fine detail. I have already noted that Snyder and Gray themselves were remarkable for the ineptness of their planning: Gray made an attempt at creating an alibi in league with his friend Haddon Gray (who knew nothing of the murder plot), but otherwise their stories were so riddled with inconsistencies that the police took very little time to unravel the mystery. In *Double Indemnity*, it is revealed that Phyllis is responsible for the deaths of many more people – including her husband's first wife and a number of children. Huff's boss, Keyes, describes her as a 'pathological case [...] The worst I ever heard of' (Cain 1936, p. 124). The novel's conclusion brings Phyllis and Walter together in a suicide pact, with Phyllis taking on an angel of death identity, with costume and make-up to match. Earlier, when they first determine to murder her husband, she tells Huff: ' "I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating though the night. I am so beautiful then ... " ' (Cain 1936, p. 20). It is this garment she wears in the novel's concluding passage, which binds very tightly the two strands – *eros* and *thanatos* – that are so fundamental to the *femme fatale* meme.

The film adaptation, written by the movie's director Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler and released in 1944, removes some of the more complex (and implausible) elements from the novel. Huff is renamed Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis is renamed Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) and the movie places a much stronger emphasis on Dietrichson's power over Neff, who is less obsessive about the planning, but still preoccupied with outwitting his boss Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). The film ends with Dietrichson shooting him; Neff then takes the gun and they embrace and as they do there are two more shots; Dietrichson slumps, dead. The final scene brings Neff face to face

with Keyes, for whom he has been sitting all night taping his confession (an alternate ending, with Neff delivered to the gas chamber, was dropped).

Versions of Ruth

Cain provided strong characterisations of his women, Phyllis Nirdlinger in *Double Indemnity* and Cora Papadakis in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both of whom would become important templates for the development of the *femme fatale* in *noir*-oriented fiction and cinema. Similarly, both Kobler and the former detective Arthur A. Carey essentially accept the dominant reading of the Snyder/Gray relationship that circulated in the press at the time: Ruth Snyder is cast as the prime mover behind the crime, and Judd Gray as the hapless accomplice whom she ensnared. Kobler believes that, '[h]ad circumstances not conspired to entangle his life with this one fatal woman it seems inconceivable that the thought of murder would ever have crossed his mind' (1938, p. 47). He also suggests that the entire tragedy germinated in Snyder's fantasies of escape from her humdrum life and stale marriage. 'In a sense the murder of Albert Snyder may be viewed as a materialised fancy, a spontaneous generation from Ruth's brain', he suggests (p. 12). Later, he firmly states his 'conviction' that 'Ruth Snyder planted in Gray's mind the suggestion of destroying [Albert] Snyder with a thoroughness worthy of a trained psychologist' (p. 24), further emphasising the notion of Snyder as manipulator – a familiar feature of the *femme fatale* and significant, as I will show, in the media representation of Amanda Knox (see pp. 154–5).

Carey also chooses to cast Snyder as manipulative and devious. From his first encounter with her, he claims to have been alert to her wiles: 'She was lying on her side, groaning, but her sharp blue eyes, squinting out of their corners, observed my movements' (1930, p. 264). He claims to have questioned Snyder as to whether her husband had had life assurance in place and, on hearing how substantial the assured sum was, was immediately 'quite satisfied as to a probable motive for the murder of her husband' (p. 266). Once Snyder began to confess, the narrative, as mediated through Carey's account, is once again a familiar one: she had asked Judd Gray to help her get rid of her husband, and proceeded to manipulate him into the murder plot.

Both writers choose to emphasise Snyder's sexuality. For Kobler, it was 'the desires kindled by Ruth's overpowering carnality' that 'derailed' Gray (Kobler 1938, p. 29). And while, on the one hand, a footnote

dismisses the 'popular notion' that Gray and Snyder 'had intercourse' immediately after the murder – he refers to Snyder being 'unwell at the time' (a delicate reference to the fact that she was menstruating) – nevertheless Kobler goes on to suggest, in a similarly thinly veiled reference, that '[s]he probably employed some physical lure to keep Gray's resolution at fever pitch' (p. 34). Like the journalists before him, and like so many more writers to come, Carey also represents the process of persuading Gray as a seduction: 'She flattered him; embraced him; [...] His vanity was struck and his mind befuddled with drink. He was completely in the woman's power' (p. 269). As before, the emphasis is on her dominating and intoxicating effect on Gray, with a subtext not only of seduction, but of the corrupting influence of alcohol.

While Kobler's task in the main body of the book is to edit court transcripts, in the opening part he reimagines the crime itself, constructing a detailed description of the murder. In this sense, it takes on an odd interstitial status and reads more like a true crime account than a chronicle of events and for this reason it belongs alongside the fictional intertexts such as Cain's novels and their film versions. Kobler allows himself room for considerable imaginative play and takes the opportunity to elaborate on the idea of Snyder as the manipulator as he recreates the minutes leading up to the murder. In his version, Gray is drunk, but Snyder has remained resolutely sober. Confirming that her husband is sound asleep, she returns to Gray in a state of excitement – 'her eyes are bright. She is breathing rapidly' (p. 35) – and she leads him by the hand to the threshold of the bedroom. Gray's state of mind as the crime is committed is depicted as confused, terrified, hazed by alcohol. Snyder, by contrast, is clear and determined (there are references to her 'murderous hatred' of her husband and 'her duplicity' [p. 36]). While he experiences 'remorse and revulsion' in the aftermath (p. 37), she, the unsexed Lady Macbeth to Gray's fearful, soliloquising would-be king, seems to feel no such compunction. It is Snyder who leads the clean-up operation and the attempt to construct a crime scene that will make the murder look like a botched burglary.

The aura of the lethal woman undoubtedly colours each of the fictionalised Ruth Snyders in the novels by Matthews and Cain. It is most apparent in *Double Indemnity* where, from the first moment Phyllis mentions setting up a policy without her husband's knowledge, Huff is aware of the danger opening up before him: 'I was going to get out of there, and drop those renewals and everything else about her like a red-hot poker. But I didn't do it' (Cain 1936, p. 13). In the novel, Huff fails to follow his instinct. In the film adaptation, he does, leaving almost

as soon as Phyllis begins to discuss the idea. However, he knows that this is not the end of the matter. In the narrative voice-over he tells us, 'I was all twisted up inside, and I was still holding onto that red-hot poker. And right then it came over me that I hadn't walked out on anything at all, that the hook was too strong, that this wasn't the end between her and me. It was only the beginning.' Sure enough, later that evening, Phyllis appears at his apartment, and Neff's fate is sealed. There are analogous watershed moments in *Postman* and *To the Gallows I Must Go*, points at which the male protagonist hesitates, and then steps over the line. Each is freighted with the sense of irresistible attraction, and inescapable doom. In *Double Indemnity*, Cain even picks up on the serpent metaphor used frequently by the prosecution when describing the effect Snyder had on Gray: as Huff's suspicions of a double-cross grow, he reveals, 'I loved her like a rabbit loves a rattlesnake' (Cain 1936, p. 84). As things begin to fall apart, Huff realises that Phyllis is 'a killer out-and-out', that 'She had used me like a cat's paw so she could have another man, and she had enough on me to hang me higher than a kite' (p. 96). Mid-panic, as their plot threatens to derail, they turn on one another: 'There we were, after what we had done, snarling at each other like a couple of animals, and neither one of us could stop' (p. 61). Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of enacting the plot to murder her husband, he realises, 'I had done all that for her, and I never wanted to see her again as long as I lived' (p. 64). In a resonant phrase that captures some of the spirit of mutual enmity that infected Snyder and Gray as they faced one another across the courtroom, he adds: 'That's all it takes, one drop of fear, to curdle love into hate' (p. 64).

I have already noted how the prosecutors and Judd Gray's defence team mounted what seems to have been accepted at the time as a perfectly plausible justification for his weakness and his failure to resist Snyder's demands. According to Kobler, Ruth was not a woman lonely and trapped in a loveless marriage looking for an escape; she was actively on the hunt for a man she could control and manipulate in a way that had proven impossible with her husband. He imagines her 'cunningly playing upon her lover's weaknesses in a manner calculated to secure his complete subjugation', and, without citing any evidence from Gray's testimony or elsewhere, speculates that, as her plot reached its climax, 'She withheld her favors, knowing her body was vital to his drugged senses' (p. 25). Kobler's analysis is clearly influenced by Freudian thinking, casting Gray as 'a magnificent clinical study of the Oedipus complex, though the term "mamma's boy" describes him equally well'. Kobler believed that beneath the surface ('kind, obedient,

honorable') 'seethed a mass of desires which made poor Gray tremble and blench when he finally recognized them for what they were' (p. 13). In a later passage, he writes of Gray 'plung[ing] deeper into slavery, effacing, prostrating himself at Ruth's feet in a kind of masochistic ecstasy. There was something of the medieval flagellant in Judd Gray', he concludes (p. 17). In turn, Snyder apparently 'gloried in this new power [. . .] It exalted her to be looked upon as a queen, a goddess' (p. 18). Snyder appears in Kobler's version as the dark and powerful *femme fatale*, described in the kind of self-consciously poetic writing that Cain avoids at every turn, even though his are works of fiction and Kobler is purporting to present a true history of the case: 'Ruth's face gleamed whitely in the darkened kitchen. To what disaster her crooked, beckoning finger might summon him Gray was beyond knowing or caring' (Kobler 1938, p. 31). While Gray's consciousness, his reactions, his decisions, are vividly imagined, Snyder's remain topics for brief speculation at best, as this illustrates: 'Ruth's exasperation must have been extreme but she wisely refrained from pressing him' [p. 31]).

It is significant that Kobler's account slyly interiorises Gray while never managing, or even attempting, to do the same for Snyder. The novels and films inspired by the Synder-Gray case also tend to take the form of a first-person narrative from the perspective of the Gray-equivalent character. These women are not permitted to tell their own stories. As with Kobler's account, the convention of adopting the male character's first-person narrative allows space for exploration of the interiority of the male 'victim', simultaneously casting the *femme fatale* in her familiar role as essentially unknowable, her motives and intentions shrouded in mystery. *To the Gallows I Must Go* is recounted from the first-person perspective of Lorimer, and there is considerable weight given to his unhappy marriage. The narrative structure and tone is not dissimilar from the voice-over in the film adaptation of *Double Indemnity* ('I want to put things down as they really happened [. . .] This is my last chance, because the time is short' [Matthews 1931, p. 13]). Matthews hints that his Snyder character, Grace, remains sober and in control at the times his narrator drinks excessively: 'She drank quite a lot herself when I was with her, but it never seemed to affect her much' (p. 67), and when she makes him promise to carry out the murder, he agrees, helpless to resist: in giving testimony, Gray had claimed Ruth's eyes had 'ruled me', establishing 'complete physical and mental domination' over him (*NYDN* 1 April 1927, p. 3) (see p. 106, above). In the same way, Matthews characterises Lorimer as an automaton: 'It was as if somebody else was speaking. I had no interest in what I said. All I wanted was to touch her

body with mine' (pp. 83–4). On the night of the murder, he drinks himself into oblivion; when he tries to tell her he cannot go through with the murder, in a moment that draws on Gray's notion of Snyder hypnotising him,[10] he writes: 'I could feel her eyes boring into me through the darkness. [...] I knew it wouldn't work. She was too strong for me' (p. 120).

Matthews coincidentally makes the same Freudian connection Kobler proposes, depicting Lorimer as being unnaturally close to his mother, who periodically co-habits with him, his wife and young son. However, he is not as straight-laced as the real Judd Gray was frequently represented: he meets Grace via another woman he has casually slept with, and he is portrayed as the one seeking a second rendezvous after their first sexual encounter (pp. 58–60). There is a strong accent on Grace's sexuality: 'You couldn't have called her shameless exactly, because that would mean that she knew what it was to be ashamed, and I don't think she did', he reflects. On one occasion, as she emerges from the bathroom, he writes, 'She was like a savage woman [...] Just for a minute it almost scared me! I thought: "She isn't civilised"' (pp. 63–4). This characterisation of Grace as wild and animalistic renders her as something other than human; the same kind of discourse would characterise a major 'kiss and tell' story about Knox (see pp. 169–70).

The idea of Snyder as goddess and Gray as a worshipper at her shrine is carried over into Matthews' novel (p. 64), but it also features a sadomasochistic element in the relationship that Cain echoes in his versions. Lorimer reacts violently the first time Grace suggests 'we put my husband out of the way': 'I hit her hard in the face and leaped out of bed as if I were jumping away from a snake' (p. 71). The episode ends with Lorimer begging and receiving forgiveness (p. 73). Later, when they have murdered Haxall and Grace tells him to tie her up, he loses control, pulling the rope painfully tight; Grace turns and bites his finger, and he strikes her so hard he renders her unconscious. He then holds a chloroform-soaked rag over her face, and it is unclear at first whether or not he has killed her, too (pp. 126–7). When they next meet, it becomes obvious to him that '[s]he really enjoyed being beaten up', and he is repulsed by her ('I couldn't stand having her touch me [...] The idea of even touching her filled me with loathing') (pp. 143, 147) – the ambivalence the *femme fatale* provokes is powerfully conveyed, as it is in Cain's novels. As Lorimer tries to back out of the murder itself, Grace urges him on. The murder is a blur, but implicates them equally in the violence. As they burn the evidence in the basement furnace, including Grace's torn nightgown, Lorimer observes her, once again unnerved: 'With the

red light from the furnace door streaming over her naked body [...] she looked beautiful but she was wild; I was afraid to touch her' (p. 124).

Cain's *Postman* also carries a sadomasochistic charge in its delineation of the Cora/Frank relationship. The first time they kiss, Frank writes, 'I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth' (Cain 1934, p. 9). When he rips her blouse and punches her to make it look as if she has been injured in the car accident ('I hauled off and hit her in the eye as hard as I could'), she responds, 'Yes! Yes, Frank, yes!', and it is implied that they have sex at the crash site (p. 45). When they make love after their reconciliation, in the wake of the trial and acquittal, she demands, 'Rip me, Frank. Rip me like you did that night.' The book's misogynistic streak grows a mile wilder when Frank beholds her naked and writes: 'She looked like the great grandmother of every whore in the world. The devil got his money's worth that night' (p. 86). Once again, there is a strong emphasis on the idea of the woman's overt, transgressive sexuality enchanting her helpless male partner.

All three novels, and the film versions that followed, drew on specific elements of the Snyder-Gray trial, particularly in the construction of the Snyder-equivalent characters. At the time of the trial the focus was almost always on Snyder, with Gray figuring only in as much as he shed light on Snyder: there was, comparatively, scant media interest in Judd Gray himself; and he certainly garnered considerably more sympathy from the watching public. Gray in some respects remained hazy right up to the moment that he walked into the execution chamber, his spectacles removed, blinking myopically at the witnesses assembled to watch him die. In the intertexts, however, Gray and his fictional equivalents snap into focus. While his comparative invisibility at the trial seemed to render him a more sympathetic figure, the reverse is true with the intertexts: by investing the Gray proxies with interiority, the authors bestow depth and dimensionality, often via a first-person narrative or voice-over. In the process, they also become a mouthpiece for the kind of misogyny that informed the media coverage of Gray's lover in the first instance. It is no surprise to find that it took the imagination of a woman to bring interiority to Ruth Snyder.

Is nothing mine? Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928)

Sophie Treadwell, very readily identifiable as one of those dangerous 'new women' noted as a threat to ordered society in the 1920s, wrote a number of plays exploring female sexual freedoms. *Ladies Leave* (1929)

chronicled the 'moral and sexual redefinition' of its protagonist Zizi Powers, who, having taken a lover, then abandons both him and her husband to forge a new life for herself (Gainor and Dickey 2005, p. 45). However, drawing on the Snyder-Gray trial she had attended (Treadwell had worked as a court reporter in San Francisco), she wrote an altogether more radical and challenging play in *Machinal*. The first production, staged on Broadway, premiered on 7 September 1928, less than eight months after Snyder and Gray were executed. Directed by the experienced theatre director and producer Arthur Hopkins, the play featured Clark Gable in the equivalent of the Judd Gray role. Although it was generally very well reviewed, it was less successful commercially, closing after 91 performances – respectable but hardly a box office hit. Its London premiere was in 1931 under the title *The Life Machine*, and the play also enjoyed a spectacularly successful run in Moscow where its critique of elements of urban capitalism presumably translated well. Although Treadwell was less explicit in the published version about the roots of the play, elsewhere the inspiration is quite clear: Jerry Dickey quotes the earliest manuscript, where Treadwell notes that 'the tremendous interest and curiosity already aroused in it [the story] by the actual and similar story of Ruth Snyder' was a key factor in the way she intended the play to work (Ozielbo and Dickey 2008, p. 148).

Machinal, an expressionist piece, works chiefly with archetypes. Very few of the characters are named: instead, they are given stock labels such as Stenographer, Nurse and Telephone Girl. However, the patterns and characters Treadwell works with come not from the recycled misogynist myths that underpinned much of the press coverage and public debate about Ruth Snyder – and the works of Kobler, Matthews and Cain. Instead, Treadwell deploys her characters and their stock situations in order to shine a light on what she understood to be the gender inequalities of her age. We see the independent, autonomous young working woman at the office in the first scene ('To Business'), scenes from her early married life (scenes three and four, 'Honeymoon' and 'Maternal'), and the misery that it entails. In the second phase of the play, 'Prohibited' depicts a meeting with A Man who will become her lover – the following scene represents their illicit, fleeting blissful affair ('Intimate'), and is juxtaposed with 'Domestic', depicting the misery of her married life. The final two scenes recount her trial for the murder of her husband ('The Law') and her execution ('A Machine'). The structure of the play is episodic, the dialogue often denaturalised, and there are disconcerting *lacunae* where key events have to be inferred to have taken place – most significantly, the murder itself.

The protagonist of *Machinal* is in some senses a riposte to the determination of the news media to represent Ruth Snyder as something extraordinary. Treadwell's emphasis in her play is on the Young Woman, Helen, as everywoman.[11] A *Daily News* article about the 'crank letters' Snyder received during her incarceration singles out one rare sympathetic one from a female correspondent that is very pertinent in this context: 'Often in my mind I commit crime after crime', the author of the letter confessed, reflecting on her difficult marriage; 'Which in God's sight is as black as yours, because I know better. Brave the fight and make your place of confinement cheerful with your own sunshine' (*NYDN* 18 April 1927c, p. 6). The letter captures very accurately the connection Treadwell invites the audience to make with Helen in *Machinal*. However, while she is on the one hand a representative figure, the character of Helen stands out from the rest of the cast of characters for her relative depth and detail. Expressionist techniques dominate, and the others are sketched with one or two dominant, identifying traits: from the brash and naïve Filing Clerk, with his exclamation of 'Hot dog!' at every fresh, gossipy revelation, to the flirtatious Telephone Girl.

Jennifer Jones suggests that Treadwell's play 'posits that a woman's natural state is not matrimony and motherhood but that those roles are forced upon her by a patriarchal culture' (2003, p. 40). In her marriage to her boss, a man she not only does not love, but from whom she recoils in disgust, Helen finds financial security, but no happiness. Before she accepts his proposal, she appeals to her mother for guidance; when she tells her she does not love him, her mother is dismissive, asking whether love will pay the bills (Treadwell 1993, p. 17). Helen gets no understanding when she tries to explain her feelings of revulsion ('Your skin oughtn't to curl – ought it – when he just comes near you – ought it?' [p. 18]). Her wedding night is an excruciating ordeal: her new husband deploys crude jokes and remarks like weapons; he springs a 'good story' on her like a physical ambush, and counts down the minute alone in the bathroom that she has requested as if it were a prelude to a physical attack. The scene ends with her in tears and, with great poignancy, crying out for the mother who had dismissed her daughter's appeal for understanding as 'crazy' (p. 19).

The uncontrollable loathing for her husband carries over into the maternity scene, where her nausea seems to be induced by his presence, and triggered by the nurse's declaration that childbirth is 'natural'. 'She's got that gagging again', the husband tells the nurse; 'Like she had the last time I was here' (p. 28). The comic irony continues after he leaves, with the nurse telling Helen, 'You got a mighty nice husband, I guess

you know that? (*Writes on chart.*) Gagging' (p. 29). Helen, seemingly bereft of maternal instinct, only wants to escape. 'I smell everything', she confides to the nurse, in a tone of existential horror (p. 28). The doctor is patronising, showing no sign of understanding, no empathy, barking orders and speaking to Helen as if to a child who cannot understand him. 'These modern neurotic women, eh, Doctor?' he remarks to his younger colleague (p. 29). With no understanding of the complexity of Helen's mental state, he merely repeats, insistent, impersonal: 'Put the child to breast' (p. 29). He will tolerate no objection from the nurse, whom he flatly contradicts, humiliates, and berates for challenging him.

In one respect, *Machinal* provides an unflinching assessment of the cultural and social impact of modernity: 'The woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized', Treadwell notes in her short preface to the play; the daily business of life – work, marriage, maternity – are 'Mechanical . . . nerve-nagging', and the sounds the play experiments with often serve to underline that sense of mechanical repetition – the 'office machines: typewriters, adding machine, manifold, telephone bells, buzzers' (p. 1) in the first scene; the noise of steel riveting that punctuates the maternity scene; the 'clicking of telegraph machines offstage' in the trial scene (p. 60); all chosen, Treadwell notes, for 'their inherent emotional effect [. . .] but contributing also to the creation of a background, an atmosphere' (p. xi). Often the other characters also form part of this backdrop of automation: the monotonous chant of letters and numbers from the office workers at the beginning of the first episode, the rhythm occasionally broken by the interspersing of snatched dialogue between the characters. In performance, the effect is underlined by the coordination of their movement, in orchestrated, expressionist mode. Even her mother's nagging voice in the second episode of the play becomes part of the background noise.

The play explores Helen's various modes of enslavement – to her tedious job, to her husband, to her child – and this, understood as the inevitable lot of the woman in this new age, is set against the privileges of male power and freedom enjoyed by the character of Richard Roe, the man who becomes, fleetingly, Helen's lover. For him, the land 'below the Rio Grande' symbolises an escape from convention, commitment and responsibility: 'Oh – you're free down there! You're free!' Helen, on the other hand, knows 'I'll never get – below the Rio Grande – I'll never get out of here' (p. 49). When Roe talks about riding in 'the high dark mountains', he is signalling a real as well as a metaphorical freedom. For Helen, a few snatched hours with her lover represent a blissful but fleeting escape from the prison of her loveless marriage.

Roe tells Helen a story of escaping captivity by killing two Mexicans armed only with a bottle full of stones (pp. 39–40), and these stones become symbolic, for Helen, of both her enslavement and her route to freedom: Episode Seven depicts the married couple, each reading a newspaper; the husband reads excerpts from stories about financial transactions, while Helen chooses stories about a wife leaving her husband, a woman disappearing, and a girl turning on the gas (as Snyder was accused of having done in an earlier attempt on Albert Snyder's life). As she reads of a 'Sale of jewels and precious stones', she suddenly puts her hands to her throat, exclaiming, 'I feel as though I were drowning [...] With stones around my neck' (p. 56). The scene reveals the chasm between them: for the husband, in a typical *reductio ad absurdum*, life is breath and death is, quite simply 'no breath'. Helen, on the contrary, is acutely sensitive, and well aware that she inhabits a living death with the man she has married. In the monologue that closes Episode Seven, her psyche is besieged by a chorus of invasive voices that cannot be silenced even by Helen's terrified scream (p. 59).

Attempting to emulate Roe's violent act in order to secure her own route to freedom, Helen kills her husband in similar fashion, using a bowl full of pebbles given to her by her lover. But while Roe's violence liberates him, Helen's fate is very different: imprisonment and execution. Freedom is something that Roe believes to be his by right; something that her husband aspires to ('I'm going to enjoy life from now on [...] I'm going to make up for all I missed' [p. 25]); and something that Helen finds to be ultimately beyond her reach – and in reaching for it regardless, she brings about her own damnation.

Episode Eight, which stages the trial, is the one scene centred on Treadwell's direct knowledge of Ruth Snyder's situation. Treadwell focuses the tragedy of the drama by making Helen her husband's sole attacker. Nevertheless Roe plays a role analogous to Gray's by being the one who effectively condemns her to death by providing the evidence against her, just as Gray's testimony condemned Snyder in the eyes of the public and in court. Like the earlier office scene, the movements and the dialogue are synchronised and mechanised: 'The words and movements of all these people except the YOUNG WOMAN are routine – mechanical. Each is going through the motions of his own game', as the stage direction notes (p. 60). The lawyers seem most intent on scoring points off each other, grandstanding for the edification or entertainment of those assembled in the court: Helen herself is almost forgotten. There is a degree of cynicism evident in Treadwell's depiction of the

members of the press in the courtroom, with the reporters delivering sharply contradictory commentaries:

> FIRST REPORTER (*writing*). The accused woman told a straightforward story of –
>
> SECOND REPORTER. The accused woman told a rambling, disconnected story of –
>
> (p. 66)

The technique is very different, but the effect is strikingly similar to the sequence in *Picture Snatcher* that depicts Danny's breathless but flat account of the execution, and Alice's rendering of it in tabloid prose. Helen is destroyed on the witness stand; she weeps at her betrayal at the hands of the cowardly, absent Roe, and her confession is finally given voluntarily. As with Frances Howard, Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox, the image of the defiant woman beaten down, broken, yielding up supposed secrets, is a vital stage in the nullification of the dangerous woman.

Episode Nine, subtitled 'A Machine', takes us into Sing Sing prison. The irreconcilability of her values with the values of the society which tries to bend her to its will is clearly shown in Helen's dialogue with the Priest (if one can call it dialogue, since the Priest seems unable to understand anything she is trying to communicate to him): 'I've been free, Father! For one moment – down here on earth – I have been free! [...] A great sin – a mortal sin – for which I must die and go to hell – but it made me free! One moment I was free!' (p. 80). Helen's moment of freedom was in the night she spent with Roe, a sexual awakening, and she cannot comprehend that 'all I ever knew of Heaven' could have been a mortal sin (p. 80). Ironically, it was only with Roe that she felt 'purified' as she puts it in Episode Six ('Intimate') (p. 51), and this is set against her conversation in the following scene with her husband, all uncomprehending, who describes her as 'one of the purest women who ever lived' (Episode Seven, 'Domestic', p. 54). He imagines that this is why Helen used to flinch when he touched her. But, for Helen, it is transgression, her illicit affair that has purified her.

Helen's desperate questioning of the Priest is met only with platitudes. He offers nothing but rote religion – the kind Ruth Snyder seemed to embrace in her final weeks, days and hours. The sin of love, Helen concludes, is all she has known of heaven. There is a moving moment of reconciliation with her mother as the shadows gather: although she

rejects her as a 'stranger' at first ('she's never known me – never known me – ever'), at the last moment, as her mother turns to walk away, she reaches out to her, and they embrace through the bars of her cell. Like Snyder, Helen's last thoughts are for her daughter: 'Wait! Wait! Tell her! Wait! Just a minute more! There's so much I want to tell her – Wait –', before the jailer pulls her mother away, and the guards march Helen off the stage to the execution chamber, followed by the priest emptily and finally nonsensically reciting the names of random saints (pp. 81–2).

As the guards prepare her for death, Helen refuses to submit. Having her hair forcibly shaved ('The rule – Regulations – Routine', she is told by various officers [p. 79]) sparks a final effort of resistance: 'No more – not now – I'm going to die – I won't submit! Not now!' She is left weeping, 'Submit! Submit! Is nothing mine? The hair on my head! The very hair on my head –' (p. 79). It may be that the obsession with her hair is a nod to Snyder's own preoccupation (see p. 99). In one of the last half a dozen lines of the play, one reporter mentions to another how she adjusted her hair beneath the 'cap' – the football helmet containing the electrode. Just as Snyder was interrupted mid-sentence by the executioner, so Helen's final cry, 'Somebody! Somebod' – is choked off (p. 83). In reviews of the original production, the play's final moment was singled out by a number of critics. Described by one in these terms – 'light growing brighter, flame colors at the bottom rising into the blue, the moment of death for the tormented being in the electric chair', some interpreted it as a moment of transcendence, 'the migration of a woman's soul' (cited in Ozielbo and Dickey 2008, p. 153). In the end, the 'real' machine annihilates the young woman who has struggled so desperately against the metaphorical one for the entirety of the drama's action.

Sophie Treadwell's play may not have had an impact on a scale in any way commensurate with some of the other Snyder intertexts, particularly Cain's novels and their subsequent film adaptations. Its significance lies in its seismic reorientation of the Snyder narrative. While the others accept and then simply re-deploy the familiar features of the patriarchal myth of the *femme fatale* – the woman as transgressor, as temptress, as manipulator, her beauty concealing moral deformity – Treadwell roots the tragedy in the young woman's struggle for autonomy in a society that militates against her free choice, and which grinds her down, spiritually and emotionally, every which way she turns. While it would be a mistake to read the play as an *apologia* for Snyder who was, after all, a participant in an appalling crime, nevertheless,

Machinal offers an alternative narrative that challenges the dominant stereotype of the lethal woman.

Conclusion

Broadway producer David Belasco who, like a number of other celebrities, attended part of the Snyder-Gray trial, described the case as ‘a great dramatic struggle [...] in which two human beings, who once were lovers, are fighting a battle to the death, not only with the State, but with each other’ (*NYT* 26 April 1927, p. 2). Whether the characters, in the end, were anything so dramatic is debatable. The crime was remarkable, in a sense, for precisely how *un*remarkable its key players were: therein lay much of its fascination for the public at the time. It was essentially a prosaic story, and Ruth, Judd and Albert were as familiar as a tabloid reader’s next-door neighbours. Ruth Snyder, drawn as a devious, manipulative, dominating woman of questionable morals and excessive sexual appetites, possessing an unfeminine capacity for violence, was dangerous because she seemed so very ordinary. However, the press constructed something extraordinary as they built their narrative of a woman leading her lover into a murder motivated by hatred and greed. They drew on long established negative stereotypes of femininity, and painted her in already familiar colours. The news-reading public, meanwhile, seems to have relished every bulletin from the jailhouse, the courthouse and the execution chamber. The characters in this part faithfully reported, partly wildly fanciful scenario were then in turn ripe for development in fictional revisitations of source material, and so Snyder was recirculated into the cultural imagination.

Reporting on Ruth Snyder’s testimony, one commentator suggested that she was ‘either the greatest actress since Bernhardt’ or ‘the most wronged, the most maligned woman in history’ (*NYDN* 30 April 1927b, p. 4). The dichotomy between innocence and guilt (the Bernhardt comparison, of course, implied a performance of innocence, as well as manipulative, devious cynicism) was, potentially, an intriguing battleground. As things transpired, Snyder never really stood a chance. As her lover, in a desperate act of self-preservation, turned on her (as she did on him too, of course), as the press circled, and as the prosecution and Gray’s legal team prepared to take her apart in court, Snyder deployed one iteration of herself after another, all in vain. Outfacing them with a steely glare only reinforced the idea of her as dominatrix; trying charm merely shored up the image of her as temptress. Attempts to portray herself as a good wife and mother were either ridiculed or seen as further

evidence of her attempts to manipulate her audience. From the heart of the crossfire, it seems she could find some kind of bemused solace in declarations of love and offers of marriage from complete strangers, and in the burnished throne of fleeting celebrity status. The tabloids were a shallow but dazzling mirror. Finally, beyond the image of 'ruthless Ruth', of the marble woman, of the Nordic vampire, there was simply Ruth Snyder, all hope of a reprieve gone, in her last hours writing a letter that lamented the sorrow she was bequeathing her mother and her daughter. And a trembling walk to the electric chair where she would be pinned and fixed forever, frozen in one shuddering moment by the dead eye of a hidden camera.

4
Amanda Knox

> This isn't a case about ... about a character; this isn't a case about a *femme fatale* ...
>
> Amanda Knox[1]

Introduction

The variety of discourses that require close attention when analysing a case such as Knox's are different from but not necessarily more complex than they are for the historical cases. However, they are both more varied and more voluminous. As well as the newspaper medium (which itself is now difficult to uncouple from newspapers' web presence and their interactive dimensions in terms of reader responses), TV reportage and internet news coverage, there is a seemingly endless proliferation of other platforms for report, comment and debate: websites, blogs and discussion boards. The potential scope for such an investigation stretches out into an endless, flat horizon. Since the sources citizens rely on today for their news and commentary are very diverse, and increasingly interactive, it is necessary to take account of that proliferation in order to build a full picture of the impact of the case, while adopting an approach to the data that remains manageable.

I will return to the newspaper medium in a moment, since this area will be the focus for much of my discussion in this chapter. However, there are a number of other kinds of source which require some attention. First, a number of so-called true crime books have been written about the case, and at times I will draw on Barbie Nadeau's *Angel Face: The True Story of Student Killer Amanda Knox* (2010), Candace Dempsey's *Murder in Italy* (2010) and Nina Burleigh's *The Fatal Gift of Beauty* (2011).

Two in particular were generally understood to represent pro- and anti-Knox factions in debates about her guilt or innocence (Dempsey and Nadeau, respectively). Another couple of books document conversations with Knox during her incarceration, one by an Italian politician who befriended her over the course of a number of regular visits, and one by a fellow inmate. These two titles – Rocco Girlanda's *Take Me with You: Talks with Amanda Knox in Prison* (2010) and Florisbela Inocencio de Jesus's *Walking with Amanda* (2010) – are significant in that they are the only first-hand accounts of Knox's time in prison, apart from Knox's own memoir.[2] They are also fascinating for the ways in which they diverge quite radically from the Knox *personae* that had clogged the channels of media, both anti- *and* pro-Knox, over the preceding years, depicting as they seem to a remarkably centred, serious, sensitive young woman.[3]

A number of documentaries devoted to the case have been broadcast on US and UK television. They provide another angle on the media treatment of Knox (and are potentially influential in terms of public opinion, as the Knox camp realised relatively early on in the case). They are also situated in a context where true crime on TV has become increasingly popular: programmes such as *Sex, Lies and the Murder of Meredith Kercher* (Channel 4 2008), *48 Hours Mystery: A Long Way from Home* (CBS 2008) and *The Trials of Amanda Knox* (Channel 4 2009) vary in the depth and quality of their journalism. On the whole, the US efforts tend to be more sympathetic to the idea of Knox's innocence, while the UK programmes are more open-minded. The first dramatisation of the case for the screen, the oddly titled *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* premiered in the US on 21 February 2011. A couple of weeks before its first broadcast, the pre-publicity, including a trailer and numerous stills, sparked great controversy, particularly in the UK tabloid press, with Meredith's father John Kercher speaking out against the film in very strong terms. Once again, the forum discussion sites and comment sections of on-line newspapers lit up in synchronisation.

As with the Howard and Snyder case studies, this chapter will consider a number of cultural intertexts; *Murder on Trial in Italy* is the most obvious, but by no means the most interesting one: even while the case was still on-going, versions of Knox were surfacing in popular culture, with references in a number of episodes of different TV shows. They are suggestive in terms of what the legacy of the case might be, and indicative of some of the ways in which the real and the fictive continue to cross over with regard to the recurring meme of the *femme fatale*. At the time of writing, another film is in pre-production: directed by Michael Winterbottom, the movie is evidently based on the murder of Meredith

Kercher, but changes the names of the characters and chooses to focus not on the murder and the trial but on a couple of journalists caught up in the reportage of it. *Face of an Angel* is based in part on Nadeau's book *Angel Face*, and Kate Beckinsale has been cast as the Nadeau character. Although there has been an insistence that the Knox story is only a backdrop to the main plot, a shot from the set in Siena, Tuscany, suggests close attention to detail, with the Knox and Sollecito actors dressed to look as they did on the morning the murder was discovered (*Daily Telegraph* 21 November 2013). The embrace and kiss outside the apartment seems to be a central moment (it is also key in *Murder on Trial in Italy*) and I will discuss in due course the significance of the TV footage of those crucial few seconds.

Discussion of the intertexts will be preceded by a detailed analysis of some aspects of the representation of Amanda Knox in the news medium. While I will cite a number of newspapers (mostly UK-based), and reference them when their reports, headlines and pictures are particularly relevant, I will focus chiefly on the UK *Daily Mail*'s reportage. The body of material gathered from a survey of the *Mail*'s coverage is in itself substantial, since the mid-market tabloid has shown a detailed and sustained interest in the case throughout. It is also the leading on-line UK newspaper in terms of readership, with 75 million unique web browsers in August 2011 (Pressgazette 2011). Its readership at that point was in fact almost double that of its closest competitor, the *Daily Telegraph*.[4] While one must be cautious when attempting to extrapolate from the audience for the print edition of the *Mail* to its web presence, the fact that it toppled the *New York Times* from the Number One spot in the online newspaper charts in December 2011 suggests that its demographic is far more varied than its print incarnation. Certainly in recent years it has established itself internationally, particularly in the USA (*Guardian* 25 January 2012). It would seem reasonable to suggest that the paper's core values and interests have a broad, populist appeal on both sides of the Atlantic. The site's editor Martin Clarke puts its success down to a simple formula – 'We just do news that people want to read' – and furthermore cites its middle-class roots and its 'entertaining, engaging way with clear, concise, straightforward copy and lots of good pictures' (Buzzfeed 2012). Its *modus operandi*, emotive and provocative headlines in a long-scrolling page, large scale images, and an endless series of picture-led celebrity stories plastered down the right-hand side of the screen, is manifestly a successful one, and one well suited to the coverage of the murder of Meredith Kercher. My own discussions with students suggest (admittedly very anecdotally) that its celebrity coverage

allows the *MailOnLine* to capture a younger age demographic than its print equivalent. In any case, as far as anything can be chosen as representative in a globalised, internet-dominated media landscape, the *Mail* seems most fit for purpose.

The *Mail*'s narratological strategies, as well as its rhetorical ones, were crucial in establishing the tone and direction of its Amanda Knox story. The representation of Knox was markedly consistent in its coverage, at least until the appeal hearing at which she was acquitted. It habitually interpreted the radical disjunction between her appearance (fresh-faced innocent) and the supposed reality (deviant killer) either in terms of the deceitful *femme fatale* meme, or as evidence of a psychotic dissociation between the Catholic-educated, 'nice', middle-class girl and the sex-crazed, drug-fuelled thrill-seeker – the kind of 'split personality' discussed in the first chapter (pp. 4–18). While the *Mail* undoubtedly operates under what Tony Harcup describes as 'an agenda of moral outrage' (2009, p. 39), its editors have always been acutely aware that an appetite for titillating stories can co-exist very comfortably with expressions of shock and disgust. The murder of Meredith Kercher, the sexualised nature of the attack and the purported involvement of another young woman in the violence might have seemed gift-wrapped for the *Mail*'s reporters and editors, as one of its earliest headlines shows: 'Foxy Knoxy "held Meredith down during deadly sex attack", say police' (*MOL* 9 November 2007 11:47 AM). So, while I will quote a wider range of newspapers (and other media sources), the *Daily Mail*, populist and popular, will remain central as I assess what the Knox phenomenon reveals about contemporary attitudes towards 'transgressive' female sexuality, and how this relates more widely to the *femme fatale* meme.

Finally, in terms of outlining my methodology for the Knox case study, I have elected to keep the original inspiration of *Basic Instinct* (see pp. 3–4) central. It is one means by which I have been able to retain some semblance of order (and sanity) in marshalling and sifting the plethora of primary source material. It also reinforces the idea that, as I have argued throughout the book, the interface between the real and the fictive has continued to shape the evolving profile of the *femme fatale* in our culture. The pattern for this part of the study, then, differs slightly from that of preceding chapters: the methodology is to select several iconic moments, images or idioms that function as keys to understand the construction of Amanda Knox as an incarnation of the *femme fatale*. These moments are linked, with more or fewer degrees of adhesion, to Catherine Tramell and *Basic Instinct*.

The main body of this chapter, then, will consider three elements of the media representation of Knox:

a) the footage filmed of Knox and Sollecito kissing outside the apartment while the police gathered forensic evidence from the crime scene;
b) a photograph of Knox with a 'halo' of lights above her head, shot shortly before her acquittal in September 2011;
c) Knox's first 'spontaneous statement' in court on 13 February 2009, made in response to testimony from a friend of Meredith Kercher's concerning a vibrator Knox kept in a beauty case in the shared bathroom.

Each of these focal points will be used as a launch pad for analysis of different aspects of the way Knox was represented during the investigation and the trials: the duplicitous and manipulative woman; the rhetoric of angels and devils and the virgin/whore binary; and hypersexuality. For the most part I will limit myself to the time period 2 November 2007 to early December 2009 (that is to say, from the day Kercher's body was discovered until the day on which Knox and Sollecito were first convicted, 4 December 2009, and the days immediately following). The chapter will conclude with a consideration of a varied set of intertexts which suggest how the dividing lines between the categories of 'reality' and fiction have broken down.

'Reading' the Amanda Knox case via *Basic Instinct* illuminates certain value judgements underpinning the coverage of Knox, regardless of her guilt or innocence. It also underlines the significance of authorship, in various forms, in these representations: the amount of control these women exert over the stories told about themselves is central to an understanding of the issues of power that are at stake, as I will suggest in the final section of this chapter, before a more expansive debate about the notion of authored identities is engaged in the book's conclusion.

Amanda Knox as celebrity murderess

If Graeme Turner is correct when he proposes that 'the precise moment at which a public figure becomes a celebrity' can be pinpointed as the point at which 'media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role [. . .] to investigating their private lives' (2004, p. 8), then one could say Knox's own celebrity status was established within days of the murder. Furthermore, no UK newspaper has

been more preoccupied with Knox's personal life than the *Mail*. From its attempt to psychoanalyse her via her family history (*MOL* 10 November 2007 8:04 PM) to its report on her supposed 'trial marriage' to James Terrano over four years later (*MOL* 15 December 2011 2:37 PM), the *Mail* has maintained a steady gaze on Knox's character and personal history; she has enjoyed (or endured) a remarkable degree of crossover between the central news territory and the right-hand margin celebrity gossip area of the newspaper's website.

Knox's story became familiar around the world, and at the end of 2008 she was voted woman of the year by an Italian TV station, ahead of Carla Bruni and Sarah Palin. Three years later, Barbara Walters, host of the popular ABC topical show *The View*, named Knox in her 2011 Most Fascinating People list (Potts 2011). And in May 2012, *Maxim* magazine (which styles itself 'The Ultimate Guys [*sic*] Guide'), named Knox in their top 100 sexiest women of the year (*Maxim* 2012). Along the way, Knox accrued a number of the trappings of celebrity, notably fan mail, including proposals of marriage (as both Madeleine Smith and Ruth Snyder did). These prompted a somewhat flattered, somewhat perplexed response from the object of their fascination. In her diary entry, she casts herself, with a dose of irony and no little insight, as one of the most ancient of celebrities, prized for her beauty and little else: Helen of Troy (*MOL* 28 June 2008 1:36 AM). Due in large part to leaked conversations and diary extracts, eagerly lapped up by the press, the 'illusion of intimacy' discussed by Richard Schickel as a familiar element of celebrity culture (1985, p. 4) was quickly and firmly established between Amanda Knox and those who took an interest in the case. The swift and wide proliferation of websites, blogs and discussion boards devoted to the crime, investigation and trials gives an indication of just how much interest the case, and Knox in particular, provoked.

The *femme fatale* meme gained traction in the media from an early stage of reporting, as journalists and commentators shaped the slim established facts, and the much more dense material of supposition and rumour, into a suitable product for media consumption: a beautiful young woman apparently involved in a brutal sexual assault and murder. A Google search ('"Amanda Knox" + "femme fatale"') conducted on 24 October 2013 returned over a million hits. Indeed, Knox would herself use this particular phrase in her book, expressing in her memoir how staggered she was to find herself 'being characterized as a femme fatale ... *Me? Really? Of all people!*' (Knox 2013a, p. 209, emphasis in the original). In a UK TV interview on 23 September 2013, days before a new appeal was due to begin in Italy, pleading for the public to judge

her 'without prejudice' she insisted, 'This isn't a case about . . . about a character; this isn't a case about a *femme fatale*' (ITV 2013). She cited the same epithet in an interview for Italian TV (*Porta a Porta*) on 15 October 2013: 'I am not the *femme fatale* criminal fantasy they describe. This person does not exist. They put a mask on me, they put evil on me, but they didn't try to see who I really was.'[5] Unfortunately for Knox, it always had been a case about a *femme fatale*, from the moment that footage of her kissing her boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito outside the apartment hours after the murder was disseminated around the world, glossed by a hundred 'Foxy Knoxy' headlines. While Sollecito and the other accused, Rudy Guede, soon receded into the background, Knox was handed the role of celebrity murderess.

Indeed, from the outset, elements of the media focused intently on Knox, while Sollecito and (once he came into the frame) Rudy Guede (see p. 151) were, in comparative terms, largely ignored. Meanwhile, the press seemed somewhat flummoxed by Patrick Lumumba (see p. 147), finding it almost impossible to pin anything substantial on him (though they tried); within a fortnight, he had been released, a slandered, innocent man. Guede, on the other hand, despite having no criminal convictions at the time of his arrest, was swiftly dubbed a 'drifter', a drug dealer and a petty thief, slipping more easily into the profile required for a sexually motivated murder, a fit made more comfortable for the media because Guede is black. Meanwhile, following a familiar pattern in the media's fabrication of celebrity criminals, a nickname derived from Knox's MySpace social networking webpage, 'Foxy Knoxy', became common currency in the tabloid coverage, swiftly putting her sexuality front and centre: by the time the counter-spin began to churn, with the Knox family and the PR firm they hired, Gogerty Marriott, pointing out that the name had been given to her on the soccer pitch at the age of eight (CNN 2013),[6] it was already far too late. Out of 145 article headlines on the *Daily Mail*'s website between November 2007 and September 2009, for example, 94 contain the epithet Foxy Knoxy. Of those 145 headlines, only 34 contain Meredith Kercher's name, and only one refers to Raffaele Sollecito by name. Indeed, Sollecito garners far less attention in the *Mail* than Knox or Guede. There is one notable exception: a feature focused on an interview with Sollecito on 11 November 2007 included a photograph of him in what appears to be fancy dress, wrapped in bandages and holding a meat cleaver and a bottle of pink liquid. There are passing references to his Manga comic collection (some of which is noted as containing elements of sexual violence), and, elsewhere, he is called 'Cannabis-smoker

Sollecito' (*MOL* 11 November 2007 5:23 PM); his penchant for knives is also mentioned several times. However, these appear as nothing when compared to the sheer volume and detail of the reportage about Knox's private life.

A long interview with the falsely accused Patrick Lumumba published by the *Mail* after his release works as a checklist of most of the negative attributes that were accruing to Knox within the first few days following the murder; taken together they create a fairly complete portrait of a *femme fatale*: promiscuous ('Every time I looked round she was flirting with a different guy'); a split personality ('Her moods started swinging from docile and lazy to hyperactive and flighty'); vindictive ('She was angry I was firing her and wanted revenge'); duplicitous ('She's the ultimate actress [...] Everything that comes out of her mouth is a lie') and deadly ('To be evil you have to have a soul [...] Amanda doesn't. She's empty; dead inside') (*MOL* 25 November 2007 1:01 PM). Lumumba might easily be forgiven a certain degree of hyperbole, given the fact that Knox's accusation that he had killed Kercher led to him being falsely imprisoned for two weeks. It also destroyed his business. However, key players in the judiciary were also inclined to describe Knox in surprisingly colourful language: the chief prosecutor Giuliano Mignini called her 'narcassistic [*sic*], angry, aggressive, manipulative, transgressive, theatrical and easily given to disliking people she disagreed with or did not follow her ideals'. Mignini went on to claim that, 'fuelled by drugs and alcohol', she and the two men 'had forced [Meredith] to take part in the sex game because Knox was fed up with Meredith's "saintly behaviour" ' (*MOL* 23 November 2009 1:28 AM). Refusing her bail, Judge Massimo Riccarelli described Knox in very similar terms – 'cunning, theatrical and self-assured' – and declared she had 'played a crucial role in the killing' (*MOL* 6 December 2007 1:22 AM): the *Mail* headlined the report 'Foxy Knoxy is so cunning, says Italian judge'.[7]

In *Basic Instinct*, as the homicide detective investigating Tramell falls under her spell, his former lover (and police psychiatrist) Beth attempts to warn him off her: 'She's evil! She's brilliant!' For the film's director, 'Catherine Tramell is the Devil. She's a human being, fully human, but she's also devilishly divine' (Bouineau 2001, p. 88) (and, of course, the devil in another guise is Lucifer, the fallen angel of light – 'brilliant' in the most literal sense of the word). The rich, metaphorical language does not seem out of place in a rather camp *neo noir*, but it may strike those used to more direct, concrete Germanic languages as unusually and perhaps inappropriately hyperbolic in an actual murder trial, even allowing for the cushioning context of tabloid discourse.[8] However, it

is worth bearing in mind that it is unlikely that such rhetoric would have been interpreted quite so literally and melodramatically by Italians seated in court, or those reading reports of court proceedings in the Italian press. There seems to have been little or no awareness of this kind of cultural difference amongst British tabloid reporters and commentators. For their purposes, the she-devil discourse was of a piece with the image of Knox that had already been established, and the lawyers' terminology simply enhanced that image, in particular the obsession with the idea of a beautiful exterior hiding a depraved inner self. It was a gift for those sections of the media already developing a narrative richly spiced with sex and violence. What transpired, I will argue, was an approach to Knox in some areas of the media that spiralled upwards at times on a daily basis, every new iteration of her as *femme fatale* feeding off the ones that had gone before, building in intensity each time.

You must remember this . . .

There are few images as emotive as the spectacle of a kiss. Alfred Eyzenshtedt's picture of a sailor and a young female nurse taken in Times Square on VJ (Victory over Japan) Day is one of the most celebrated (despite the fact that the sailor has an arm fastened around her waist and her head locked into the crook of his elbow, while he appears to be trying to subdue her and eat her face). Probably equally well known is Robert Doisneau's 'Le Baiser de L'Hotel de Ville', two lovers caught in a mutual embrace as the walkers on a busy Paris street slip-stream past them. The picture retains its power despite Doisneau's admission that it had been staged by actress Françoise Bornet and her boyfriend Jacques Carteaud ('Lovers kissing in the street, those couples are rarely legitimate', the photographer remarked in an interview in 1992) (BBC 2005). More recently, an astonishing photograph of a couple on the ground, apparently locked in an embrace, while crowds and police in riot gear move around them, snapped during the Stanley Cup hockey riots in Vancouver on 15 June 2011, caught the imagination of a global audience and quickly went viral. The image (Figure 4.1) is extraordinary: blurred in the foreground is the menacing, black-clad, helmeted figure of a police officer, complete with baton and shield. In focus some distance behind him, a woman lies on her back on the ground, her skirt hitched up over her bent legs. Her partner is lying beside her and seems to be leaning in to kiss her; she has one hand on his neck. They are lit in a yellowing phosphor glow and behind them a line of cops looks to be pushing back a retreating crowd. Street lamps flare above them, receding

Figure 4.1 The Vancouver riots kiss

into the distance. The image is enhanced by the razor-sharp definition of the couple, and their out-of-focus surroundings.

The couple was identified within 48 hours as Australian Scott Jones and his Canadian partner Alex Thomas, and the story was that Jones had gone to assist and then comfort Thomas when she had been knocked down by a riot shield. The photographer had taken the picture at the moment he leaned in and kissed her. The *Daily Mail* headlined the story 'Someone fetch the cold water cannon' (*MOL* 17 June 2011 8:47 PM). Rumours circulated: was this an attempt by Jones to generate some publicity and give him a head start in his struggle to establish himself as a stand-up comedian? (BBC 2011b). Jones claimed that he kissed her as he tried to calm her after they were 'run over' by riot police (*MOL* 18 June 2011 5:20 PM), and this seemed to be confirmed by amateur footage published in the days that followed; the same report suggested (rather optimistically, one would have thought) that the kiss might be worth over $10 m, as they hired an Australian 'PR giant' to help them 'cash in on their intimate moment' (*MOL* 24 June 2011 5:32 AM).

The image and the stories that eddy around it are instructive. First of all, there is the iconic image of the kiss itself: from Catullus to Rodin to the VJ-Day photograph, from Thomas Edison's 1896 footage of May Irwin and John Rice, via Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the*

Wind (1939), to Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the kiss has, throughout Western cultural history, been the most ubiquitous expression of connection and intimacy. However, the Vancouver kiss also shows very clearly how an image (especially of something as potentially emotive as a kiss) is open to interpretation, misinterpretation and re-interpretation by viewers: a man going to comfort and aid his partner who has been knocked to the ground becomes a couple locked in a passionate embrace, inexplicably, in the middle of a civil battleground. Clothing dishevelled in the fall becomes a skirt hitched up in the course of an erotic embrace; a chaotic tangle of limbs turns into a passionate clinch.

While Jones and Thomas evidently had hopes of exploiting media exposure and cashing in on their unexpected fame, for Knox and Sollecito their particular iconic kiss was a considerably less fortunate one, captured and circulated some time before Knox's family hired a PR firm of their own. A Google image search for 'Knox Sollecito' turns up three images from this particular moment on 2 November 2007 as the top hits.[9] The footage that was caught by a vigilant news team outside the apartment as police collected forensic evidence has become perhaps the most recognisable video material out of all the many hours of screen time devoted to the case. Knox and Sollecito were reportedly standing apart from a group of Meredith's friends who had gathered at the Via della Pergola (Nadeau 2010, p. 55). Nadeau writes that Knox was in a dishevelled state – hair messy, wrinkled jeans, wearing a military-style jacket that was too big for her, lent to her by Sollecito. By contrast, Sollecito was smartly turned out and watched proceedings with, as Nadeau perceived it, an air of aloofness (p. 55). As the news crew trains a camera on the couple, they embrace; Sollecito rubs her arm in a comforting fashion, and Knox inclines her face upwards towards his. They kiss, tenderly and fairly quickly, three times (Figure 4.2), and Knox then turns and looks off and down slightly to her right, as Sollecito looks down at her with an expression of concern (Figure 4.3).

The footage lasts seven seconds. However, picked up by agencies and channels around the world, the short segment of video was looped, slowed down, and repeated over and over in news reports and documentaries. As a consequence, it can seem like a much more substantial piece of footage than it really is when viewed in isolation. Furthermore, still images from the video freeze in time the kiss and (as frequently) Knox's slanting gaze; in this context, they resonate much more powerfully. There is considerable space for many different readings of the images that make up those seven seconds. In particular, the image of

Figure 4.2 Footage of Knox and Sollecito outside the apartment 2 November 2007 (BBC TV screen capture)

Figure 4.3 Footage of Knox and Sollecito outside the apartment 2 November 2007 (BBC TV screen capture)

Knox looking down and away from Sollecito, and the movement *into* that pose, is particularly arresting and has very likely fed the idea of Knox as a cold-hearted, manipulative young woman. Set in this context, real or imaginary, the moment is strikingly reminiscent of a *noir* thriller where the *femme fatale*'s deceptive nature is signposted for the cinema

Figure 4.4 Eva Marie Saint as Eve Kendall in *North by Northwest* (1959)

audience by a close-up: Figure 4.4 offers a representative moment from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). The equivalent of a theatrical aside, the actress offering the audience a glimpse beneath the mask, the moment is so ubiquitous that the *neo noir* erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* structured its poster design around it (Figure 4.5).

Both Knox and Sollecito were conscious, in retrospect, of how damaging the footage was. Sollecito accurately gauges that 'that kiss, a simple act of human sympathy in a moment of grief and shock', was played up by the world's media 'as evidence of the uncontrolled sexual urges of two stone-cold killers' (Sollecito 2012, p. 34). Knox also claims it was wilfully misconstrued, and her narrative stresses her vulnerability: 'Nothing felt real except Raffaele's arms, holding me, keeping me from collapsing. I clung to him. [...] I cried weakly on and off into Raffaele's sweater.' Knox attempts to desexualise the encounter by comparing their embrace to a maternal one: 'It reminded me of when I was young and had nightmares. My mom would hold me and smooth my hair and let me know I was safe. Somehow Raffaele managed to do the same thing.' Like Sollecito, she notes that 'people' would later describe the kisses as 'flirtatious – evidence of our guilt' (Knox 2013a, p. 74), although the softening of the edges continues (she uses the term 'flirtatious' rather than the much stronger phrase of Sollecito's, 'uncontrolled sexual urges'). And this is exactly how some of the media chose to present it. Much of the early coverage constructed a narrative that had Knox as a cold, deceitful

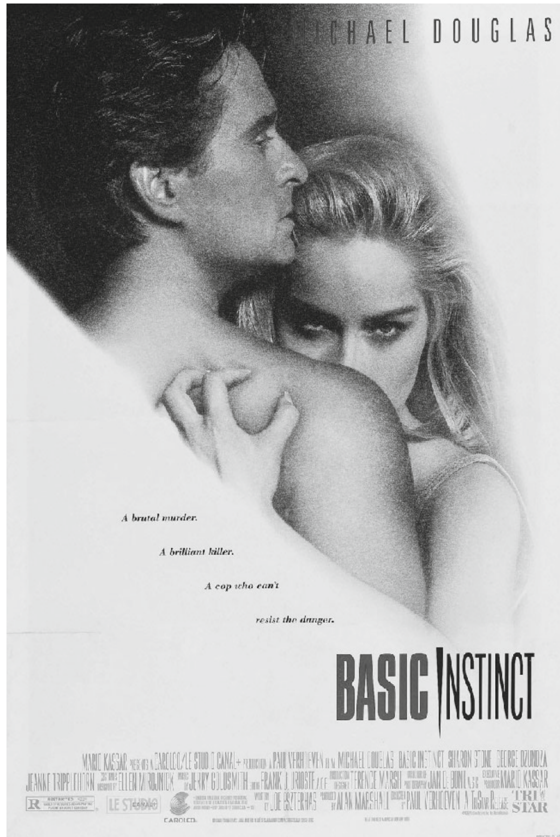


Figure 4.5 Poster art for *Basic Instinct* (1992)

and manipulative figure, and the footage of the kiss and the glance provided a very solid and, most importantly in our visually oriented culture, a *visible* foundation for that narrative. Newspaper reports would frequently refer to it in passing as an element in the profile of their suspicious demeanour.[10]

The sense that Knox was hiding her true evil nature beneath the veneer of beauty maps her quite precisely onto the figure of the classic *femme fatale*, who, as I have already established, is defined in part by a capacity for deceit, and a facility to take on different *personae* in order to mask her true intentions, feelings or identity. Lumumba believed that Knox 'would interpret roles based on the situation. Like in a movie,

if the film requests it, the actor has to change for the role' (cited in Burleigh 2011, p. 108). Furthermore, just as the *femme fatale* is often depicted as leading the male hero astray by overpowering his will with her irresistible sexuality, so Knox was cast in many media accounts as the manipulator, planner and instigator behind the killing of Meredith Kercher, with the two men cast as dupes, entranced by her sexual thrall. This trope is epitomised by the footage of the kiss and Knox's sidelong look, as interpreted within the *noir* tradition.

The idea of Knox as the manipulator of the men and as prime mover behind the murder began early and started not with a journalist, but with Sollecito himself and his legal team: 'In my previous statement', he claimed during the first few days of the investigations, 'I referred to a load of bo***cks [*sic*] because she had convinced me of her version of the facts and I didn't think anything different' (*MOL* 8 November 2007 1:07 AM). Another report published later the same day quotes Sollecito lawyer Tiziano Tedeschi positing the 'possible hypothesis [...] that being with a beautiful girl he allowed himself to be drawn into giving her an alibi' (*MOL* 8 November 2007 3:25 PM). Sollecito's lawyer Luca Maori was quoted to the effect that Rafaele blamed Amanda for having 'ruined his life' (*MOL* 15 November 2007 9:30 AM).[11]

The notion was picked up by the media and remained a popular one. Some reports suggested that Knox frequently flirted with Sollecito across the court room. According to journalist Richard Owen, after several days when she did not even glance in his direction, Knox 'broke the ice' by smiling at him and complimenting him on his short haircut; Owen continues, '[Sollecito] blushed at the compliment, according to Italian reports from legal sources who witnessed the exchange' (*Times* 19 January 2009). The *Mail* made much of the interaction between them, claiming they 'exchanged loving glances'; 'one source' claimed that you could tell 'they are still very much in love' (*MOL* 29 September 2008 1:44 AM). A lot of attention was paid to their interaction as the court dates rolled by, and in his final statement to the court at the first trial, Sollecito felt it necessary to insist he was 'not a "dog on a lead" –at the beck and call of Knox' (*MOL* 3 December 2009 1:11 PM).[12] When Knox and Sollecito were reunited in the US in 2013 in a meeting covered heavily by the world's media, the idea (fed by a thousand romantic movies) that their passion might be rekindled was too tempting for tabloids to resist. 'Back in each other's arms', declared the *Mail*, describing their meeting as a 'tryst' in which they 'hugged and kissed'. One 'onlooker' (as vague an identifier as the 'source' quoted above observing them in court) proclaimed: 'You only have to look at him to see he still

holds a huge torch for Amanda'. The article also speculated on the fact that Knox's partner James Terrano was nowhere to be seen (*MOL* 21 June 2013 7:52 AM). Once again, the emphasis is on Knox as deceptive, the implication being that the meeting was clandestine, Knox attempting to hide the 'tryst' from her current partner. It is at best obtuse and at worst disingenuous to ignore the fact that there was no attempt to shield Knox and Sollecito from the attention of the paparazzi – Terrano would not have had to look very far the next morning for images of the couple in each other's company – but imagining he *had* been kept in the dark was a much better fit for the narrative the *Mail* was constructing.

Criminologist Francesco Bruno – who, it must be noted, was hired to help Sollecito's legal team – describes the media portrayal of Knox in these terms: 'Amanda is depicted as a black widow, she is seen as a dangerous and murderous woman who has caught all the members of the crime scene in her erotic coil' (Nadeau 2008) – a phrase, incidentally, startlingly reminiscent of Judd Gray's lawyer describing Ruth Snyder ('a poisonous snake, a poisonous serpent [that] drew Judd Gray into her glistening coils' [Kobler 1938, p. 302]). Indeed, the notion of the sexually dominant female and the naïve, less experienced, submissive male also underpinned much of the coverage of the relationship between Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray. Seventy years earlier, Madeleine Smith's letters had caused consternation when read out in court for what they revealed about her sexual experience with her secret lover Emile L'Angelier, and prompted speculation about how she might have manipulated him by offering or withholding sexual favours (see pp. 36–7). The Knox equivalent, the *persona* of a woman aware of her physical attractiveness and willing to deploy it as required, recurred frequently, with journalists noting her smiles to the judges and other court officials. In calling for a life sentence and solitary confinement for Knox, Mignini described her as possessing 'a tendency to dominate'; Sollecito, by contrast, was 'cold, dependent and with a fear of losing the support of others' (*MOL* 23 November 2009 1:28 AM). The narrative that developed had Knox at the heart of the murder, either deliberately spurring Sollecito and Guede on to carry out the sexual assault, or else setting herself up as a prize, a woman whose attentions the two men were competitively striving to attract.

As well as manipulative, Knox was frequently portrayed as deceitful. In his presentation of the civil case against her, Lumumba's lawyer described her as a 'talented and calculated liar, who had deliberately gone out of her way to frame Patrick' (*MOL* 28 November 2009 10:57 AM). There is no doubt that Knox's attempt to pin the murder on

Lumumba remains one of the aspects of the case that she and her supporters find most difficult to explain away when arguing her innocence. Knox's own account lapses into an incoherence that does not seem to fit with her mostly clear and rational writing style; neither does it seem to be an attempt to conjure up an impression of her confusion under police questioning, although the rhetorical repetitions are perhaps intended to convey her desperation:

> I truly thought I remembered having met somebody. I didn't understand what was happening to me. I didn't understand that I was about to implicate the wrong person. I didn't understand what was at stake. I didn't think I was making it up. My mind put together incoherent images. The image that came to me was Patrick's face.
>
> (Knox 2013a, pp. 117–18)

Knox's conflicting stories would have a negative impact on perceptions of her trustworthiness both in the eyes of the world and presumably, and more significantly, in the eyes of the court. In a witness statement given on 2 November 2007, Knox claimed to have spent the whole night at Sollecito's apartment; on 6 November, she claimed to have been in the kitchen at the flat she shared with Kercher, and added that she heard Meredith's screams when Lumumba attacked her; this was substantiated by a voluntary handwritten note the same day, which she commented at the time was 'the best truth I have been able to think' (cited in Nadeau 2010, p. 75); in court testimony in June 2009, she reverted to her original story that she had spent the night at Sollecito's. In the wake of these self-contradictory pronouncements, the *Mail*, among others, set great store by the fact that Knox was a creative writing student, and frequently confounded this with her decision to change her story: the headline reads 'Compulsive liar Foxy Knoxy now insists she wasn't at "house of horrors" ' and the article describes how 'The American, who is also studying creative writing, gave a rambling account of the night of Miss Kercher's death' (*MOL* 11 November 2007 5:23 PM). The question that Knox's conflicting accounts beg, of course, is whether, if she is indeed innocent, she should not have one straightforward and uncomplicated account of what she did the night Meredith Kercher died. However, the *Mail* weaves the creative writing aspect into its reports in order to reinforce that sense of doubt over her trustworthiness and in so doing also manages to side-swipe the kind of college degree it routinely denigrates in its pages (see, for example, *MOL* 16 August 2013 12:03 AM).

The accusation that Knox exhibited few signs of distress in the wake of the murder of her flatmate was another aspect of the story that became increasingly significant in the way the media portrayed her, and something that Knox vigorously disputed in her memoir and in interviews conducted to promote the book in the Spring of 2013. Even after her acquittal, *Mail* columnist Amanda Platell saw fit to note: 'Those piercing blue eyes, as cold as the steel of the knife that slit Meredith Kercher's throat, have hardly flinched during her [Knox's] court appearances' (Platell 2011) – this from someone who had been nowhere near Perugia, let alone the courtroom. An Italian man who claimed to have been Kercher's boyfriend for ten days at the time of her death remarked: 'I couldn't help thinking how cool and calm Amanda was [...] Her eyes didn't seem to show any sadness and I remember wondering if she could have been involved' (*MOL* 18 November 2007 7:25 PM). A *Mail* report on 15 November carried claims from Kercher's friends that Knox was 'strange' and 'over the top', and that she 'appeared curiously unfazed' by the discovery of the body. The same article declared: 'Foxy Knoxy "wanted to go shopping" after Meredith's murder' (*MOL* 15 November 2007 9:30 AM).

This theme was elaborated further a week later when CCTV footage appeared of Knox and Sollecito allegedly 'shopping for lingerie and discuss[ing] having "wild sex"' (*MOL* 24 November 2007 5:24 PM). The video was sold to the press by the owner of the shop, who made much of the conversation he says he overheard; Burleigh notes that a number of Italian networks 'looped it alongside the tape of the couple hugging outside the murder house' – the kiss footage proving its longevity and versatility once more (2011, p. 181). Knox disputed the shopkeeper's allegation, and although she says she could not remember what she and Sollecito said to one another, she denied that they had made any reference to sex. In addition, much was made during the trial of Knox's inappropriate behaviour at the police station while she was awaiting questioning – sitting on Sollecito's knee and pulling faces, and on another occasion doing the splits and a cartwheel, supposedly in an attempt to relax. The accounts came from a number of officers, including Monica Napoleone, head of the Perugia murder squad. In a familiar scenario, her family was forced to explain these oddities away as aspects of her quirky character. In Edda Mellas's words:

> 'This is Amanda just being Amanda' [...] As her friends would say, it's an Amanda thing. The police were still being friendly to her then, so she was stretching, and they were talking to her and she said, yes,

> she had been a gymnast, and they were like, 'Well, how's about a cartwheel?' so she did one.
>
> (Guardian 27 June 2009)[13]

Accumulating with this kind of circumstantial evidence was a forensic investigator's testimony that 'when he handed Miss Knox a pair of shoe covers to prevent contaminating the evidence just hours after the murder she swiveled her hips and said "opla". He said: "I thought it was very unusual behaviour and my suspicions against her were raised"' (*Croydon Guardian* 2 June 2009). Once again, the issue was a perception of inappropriate behaviour. Knox's version has her singing 'Ta-dah' and thrusting out her arms 'like the lead in a musical' in an attempt to appear 'friendly and show I was cooperating' (Knox 2013a, p. 91). As Knox concedes, it was poorly judged, but hardly proof of a diabolical mind at work.

Frequently mentioned in relation to these moments of poor judgement were two comments made about the manner of Meredith Kercher's death: a friend of Kercher's testified that, as they waited at the police station and one of their group expressed the hope that Meredith had not suffered, Knox snapped, 'What do you think? She fucking bled to death' (*Independent* 14 February 2009). Then, as Knox gave her own testimony in court, and Maresca asked her how she knew that Kercher had died slowly, she cited in reply her knowledge of the US TV crime show *CSI*, and 'then proceeded to make gurgly, gagging sounds before the unnerved judge, jurors, and press corps [...] To the *colpevolisti*, the sound effects were a chilling, unconscious display of guilt' (Burleigh 2011, p. 263).

Such moments have been noted and logged by those convinced of Knox's guilt, and taken as proof of her coldness and, for many of them, as evidence of a psychopathic nature. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to respond to the accusations of inappropriate behaviour as Knox and her team did: after all, it is impossible to predict how any individual might respond to such extraordinary circumstances. This was the increasingly desperate plea of the Knox team at the time in the face of such accusations ('Amanda being Amanda'). Unfortunately, the Amanda that had been firmly imprinted by this point was nothing like the naïve young woman lacking self-awareness and, perhaps, a sufficient degree of emotional intelligence, that they wished to project. Instead, each of her apparent missteps was shaped to fit the emerging construction of a highly sexed, dangerous, deceitful and steely *femme fatale*.

Devil or angel? The Amanda Knox show

As I have already mentioned (see p. 147), one of Paul Verhoeven's grounding principles in his approach to Joe Eszterhas's screenplay for *Basic Instinct* was to read Trammell as the devil. The director suggested in a number of interviews that it is the only way to explain her apparent omniscience, even omnipotence, notably in her setting up of the film's climax; Eszterhas's original screenplay even has the Rolling Stones' 'Sympathy for the Devil' suggested for the soundtrack (see Simkin 2013, p. 20). A week before Knox was acquitted in October 2011, one artful (or very lucky) medium close-up shot of Knox taken from a fairly low angle captured her from the chest up, her eyes cast down; the ceiling above her head featured a light-fitting with a circle of illuminated bulbs, creating the unmistakable impression of a twenty-first-century 'slipped halo', as the *Mail* put it (Figure 4.6). According to the *Mail*, Carlo Pacelli, the solicitor acting on behalf of Patrick Lumumba, that day launched a heated attack on Knox: 'She was a diabolical, Satanic, demonic she-devil. She was muddy on the outside and dirty on the inside. She has two souls, the clean one – you see her before you – and the other. She is borderline. She likes alcohol, drugs and she likes hot, wild sex' (*MOL* 27 September 2011 1:23 PM). Although this extraordinary, overheated invective (to paraphrase The Commodores, once, twice, three times, four times a devil) passed without comment by the *Mail*, it attracted heavy criticism elsewhere, particularly in the UK, where it provoked a number of opinion columns and TV debates (see, for example, Smith 2011). The discussions often referred to a 'medieval' attitude towards women and cited the inherent misogyny of Silvio Berlusconi's Italy, and were generally sympathetic to Knox, regardless of positions on her guilt or innocence. Indeed, the demonic rhetoric is strongly reminiscent of the kind of tirade aimed at a woman much closer chronologically to the medieval period these writers invoked: Frances Howard was accused of witchcraft in her attempt to rid herself of her first husband and in her wooing of Robert Carr, and the same fears were provoked over her poisoning of Thomas Overbury (see pp. 82–5). Diabolical imagery was invoked less explicitly, but no less dramatically, by legal teams and reporters when Ruth Snyder was described repeatedly as a 'vampire' or *succuba* (see pp. 106–7).

'Who is the real Amanda Knox behind the inscrutable mask she presented in court – the wholesome innocent described by her family or the heartless seductress portrayed in the most lurid media accounts?' asks Barbie Nadeau (2010, p. 16). As noted above, the Italian press named

Figure 4.6 Picture from *MOL* 27 September 2011 1:23 PM (Mario Laporta/ AFP/Getty Images)

her '*la luciferina*', or the angel with a devil's face, 'the Dark Lady of Seattle'; and much was made by the Italian press of her 'icy' blue eyes. The *Mail* frequently deployed a similar rhetorical strategy, and chose to highlight the same apparent dichotomy: 'She has been dubbed "Angel Face" by the Italian media for her squeaky clean appearance,' wrote Nick Pisa; 'But at the same time she has also been described as sex crazed thanks to entries on her webpage and leaked extracts from her prison diary' (*MOL* 13 June 2009 1:15 AM). Elaborating the saint–sinner theme, Lumumba's solicitor Carlo Pacelli picked up on the tabloid press moniker and in court referred to Knox as a 'Luciferina [...] dirty in her soul', who is 'beautiful in her looks but also sly and intelligent.

Is she the good-looking, charming, clean white face we see here today?' he mused, sceptically (cited in Burleigh 2009): the rhetorical question had an obvious implied answer. *The Times*' reportage of Pacelli's damning speech includes a facial shot of Knox looking over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched; the caption reads, 'Amanda Knox was described in court as "beautiful and intelligent" but also "cunning, shrewd and unscrupulous" ' (*Times* 27 November 2009). Immediately following the verdict, the *Mail* ran a story with the headline 'Amanda Knox: Behind the Hollywood smile, a liar, a narcissist and a killer' (MOL 5 December 2009 1:21 AM).

As I have argued throughout this study, the media adopts a particular approach to representing women on trial for violent criminal acts, particularly murder, and their physical appearance is almost always a major preoccupation (see Marsh and Melville 2009, pp. 79–81). Barbie Nadeau evokes a familiar celebrity figure when she describes Knox's arrival for a typical day in court during the first trial: 'The photographers stand on chairs and jostle on ladders to get the best view of Amanda coming in. She smiles coyly and, like Princess Diana, lowers her head then lifts her eyes to look up at people. She is a pretty woman, and she knows it' (Nadeau 2010, p. 126). The intense interest in Knox's appearance – her clothes, her figure, her face – is in keeping with the historical case studies: Frances Howard's modest dress and sober demeanour attracted attention (see pp. 76–7), as did Madeleine Smith's silent and composed appearances during her trial (see p. 35). Similarly, Ruth Snyder's fashion choices, minutely scrutinised by the press, and her animated, often theatrical reactions to testimony are reminiscent of some of the reports about Knox's behaviour. Each woman was observed as closely as the celebrity personalities (I use the term loosely) that litter the right-hand margin of the *Mail*'s web page. Incidentally, Nadeau's aside in the quotation above ('She is a pretty woman, and she knows it') smuggles in a contestable piece of characterisation: in typical *femme fatale* fashion, Knox is portrayed as being aware of her apparent appeal, and willing to exploit it, much like Smith who reportedly told the prison matron, 'I may not be beautiful ... but I am conscious of the fact I have a certain allure' (Blyth 1975, p. 134). Similar stories accrue to Howard (see p. 68) and Snyder (see p. 102). However, it is very far from Knox's own reflections on her court appearances, which she represents as often gauche and poorly judged: 'I thought that if I dressed in my usual jeans and a T-shirt, the judges and jury would see me for who I really was, not as Foxy Knoxy', she wrote (Knox 2013a, p. 299). The implications of a phrase such as this one

('who I really was') are complex, and I will return to them in the conclusion.

Knox's choice of attire was indeed under constant scrutiny – again, the cases of Madeleine Smith and Ruth Snyder echo down the centuries (and even Frances Howard – her decision to wear her hair down for her second wedding ceremony was a signifier equivalent to the tradition of the virgin bride wearing white). Nadeau describes a typical scene among the amassed journalists: 'Each day, the Anglo press forms a consensus on her appearance. Is this light blue or powder blue? Do we say hooded sweatshirt or just hoodie? Who do you suppose French-braided her hair? Followed by laughter and a lesbian joke' (Nadeau 2010, p. 126). When Knox attended court for a pre-trial hearing in September 2008, she was described as appearing 'demurely dressed in a white blouse with her hair tied back'; Kercher family lawyer Francesco Maresca was dismissive, suggesting she was making a deliberate attempt to look 'sweet and innocent, like an angel' (*MOL* 22 September 2008 8:08 AM). On 14 February 2009, Knox caused something of a sensation by entering court wearing an oversize T-shirt with the legend 'All You Need Is Love' imprinted on the front in large letters. The *Mail* captioned the photograph of her wearing it 'The show continues: Beatles fan Amanda Knox at court in Perugia yesterday' (*MOL* 16 February 2009 9:13 AM). References in the *Mail* and other sources to her smiling broadly suggests she was well aware of the impact she was having, although her disclaimer in her memoir protests that she had had no ulterior motive when she chose to wear it, and that it had been a gift from her stepmother (Knox 2013a, p. 298).

The accusation of the smile clearly stings, implying as it does not only a lack of respect for the court, but also callousness. Ruth Snyder was well aware of this when she begged a photographer not to use any pictures of her smiling (see p. 102). Here and elsewhere, Knox claims (not implausibly) that her smiles were aimed at members of her family in court and at members of her legal team. She cites a *Daily Mail* report from the opening day of the trial which compared her to a 'Hollywood diva' (see also p. 36). 'Anyone watching or reading the TV reports would have come away believing the girl called Foxy Knoxy was amoral, psychotic, and depraved' (Knox 2013a, p. 290). As I argued in the discussion of the image of the kiss, the amount of space that exists for interpretation of still images in particular opens up a very large arena for the free play of different (and often mutually contradictory) readings of those images.

In defending herself against charges of narcissism, and pleading gauche naiveté, Knox cites one article in particular (though she does not reference it) (Knox 2013a, p. 299). The article in question is one

of a number of pieces that have attempted to build a psychological profile of Knox, articles which inevitably emphasise the sensationalist and the lurid: Sharon Churcher's piece for the *Daily Mail* (*MOL* 10 November 2007 8:04 PM) was one of the earliest and most extensive, speculating that Knox found herself competing for male attention with her own mother after Edda remarried a man much younger than herself. Churcher seems to believe that, Knox being 14 and Chris Mellas being 27 meant he was young enough to be her brother: feasible but surely rather unusual. In the article to which Knox devotes her attention, psychotherapist Coline Covington spared no hyperbole when she declared:

> Knox's narcissistic pleasure at catching the eye of the media and her apparent nonchalant attitude during most of the proceedings show the signs of a psychopathic personality. Her behaviour is hauntingly reminiscent of Eichmann's arrogance during his trial for war crimes in Jerusalem in 1961 and most recently of Karadzic's preening before the International Criminal Court at the Hague.
>
> (Covington 2009)

Innocent or guilty, it is outlandish to place Knox on a par with notorious war criminals accused of genocide, to say nothing of the logical flaws in Covington's comparisons. Another 'expert' opinion published around the same time appears equally unhinged in its points of reference: in a piece headlined 'Amanda Knox: A modern day She-Devil', criminologist David Wilson described her as 'rather like a gap-year Rose West' (*Daily Express* 7 December 2009). Here and in Covington's article, we find the kind of hysterical response that Hilary Neroni describes when she writes of how society tends to respond to the spectacle of a violent woman (see p. 40). Furthermore, Wilson suggests Knox was someone 'clearly involved with an older, more experienced boyfriend who introduced her to a lifestyle that allowed her to bend the rules of morality that had guided her in the US' (*Daily Express* 7 December 2009) – an opinion flatly contradicting the more familiar narrative of Foxy Knoxy leading the naïve and sexually *in*-experienced Sollecito into transgressive territory (a pattern replicated from the coverage of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray [see pp. 105–10]). The confusion fits a paradigm suggested by Lizzie Seal in her 'muse or mastermind dichotomy'. Seal points out that women accused of killing in partnership with men are often represented through both constructions – under the influence of their partners, or 'cunning, dominant women who are able to make men

do their bidding'; the dichotomous representation will often make such a woman 'ultimately unknowable' (Seal 2010, p. 38). In any case, for Knox and Sollecito themselves, the truth seemed to be neither, and in fact at a very distant triangulating point between. Their own story is one of mutual naiveté. As I will show, Knox devotes a considerable amount of attention to her sexuality in *Waiting to Be Heard*: it is a major strand in the counter-narrative of her memoir.

I have suggested that the dichotomy between physical beauty and supposed moral corruption in a woman has traditionally been a very lively site of cultural anxiety in patriarchal society. As I explored in particular with regard to Frances Howard, the division of women into virtuous and chaste, sinful and promiscuous, is a familiar cultural practice, as is the abiding fear that, behind the mask of beauty lies sin and evil. As with Madeleine Smith's letters, and as with the competing representations of Snyder at her trial – good wife and mother or sex-crazed killer – the contrast between the beautiful outward appearance and apparently sullied moral character of Amanda Knox opened up a clear space for the incorporation of the virgin/whore binary, a stereotype that was frequently invoked in accounts of Knox's past. It also largely defined the ways in which Amanda Knox and her alleged victim Meredith Kercher were drawn in contradistinction to one another, just as Snyder was contrasted with the patiently suffering, morally uncompromised wife of Judd Gray.

A *Daily Mail* bulletin about Judge Claudia Matteini's 19-page report from the first hearing contrasts the behaviour and motivations of the alleged perpetrators ('Raffaele Sollecito, bored with the same old evenings and desiring to try out strong emotions [...] There are no doubts that there was desire [*sic*] to try a new sensation for the boyfriend and the girlfriend') with Kercher's last known movements ('It was about that time that Miss Kercher left the home of her friend, Sophie Purton, after watching a romantic movie and sharing a meal with a group of English girls') (*MOL* 10 November 2007 10:56 PM). The same article juxtaposes two images, one of Knox from the driveway footage, her glance diverted down and away as discussed above (see pp. 50–2), and one of Kercher smiling broadly and looking straight into the camera. The pictures are captioned 'Fatal: Amanda Knox (left) is said to have lured Meredith Kercher to her death', and both the images and the words reinforce the sense of Kercher as straightforward, happy, 'normal', and Knox as shifty, deviant and dangerous.

The contrast between Knox and Kercher, which resurfaced in the testimony of a number of other witnesses including Patrick Lumumba,

Knox's flatmates and Kercher's friends, was deepened in sometimes unexpected ways. Early reports in the *Mail* chose to make much of stories that Kercher had been irritated by Knox's supposed lack of cleanliness – failing to flush the toilet or clean the bowl in particular. One article claimed that they 'often rowed [...] over [Knox's] hygiene habits and for bringing a string of men home', in a move that associates supposed poor personal hygiene with promiscuity (*MOL* 17 November 2007 11:44 AM). The same rationale lay behind the reports that circulated after one of the officers who questioned Knox when Kercher's body was discovered apparently declared that she 'smelled of sex' (*Guardian* 8 October 2011). While this was picked up by some debating the case as evidence that Knox had not showered that morning as she had claimed (thus casting doubt on her alibi), it was just as frequently used, more or less consciously, to reinforce the image of Knox as a 'skank' – promiscuous and sleazy. One report in the *Mail* depicts a smiling Kercher captioned 'Innocent victim: Meredith Kercher was studying in Italy' (*MOL* 9 November 2007 11:47 AM). In the article, a university spokesman pays tribute to 'a beautiful, clever and happy young woman'. Flatmate Filomena Romanelli is quoted as 'insist[ing]' that 'Meredith had never let any man into her bedroom except for Silenzi Giacomo, her boyfriend' (*MOL* 9 November 2007 9:53 PM), and such details contrasted strongly with the image of Knox that was now becoming established – of a promiscuous, thrill-seeking young woman.

Just a girl who can't say no? Knox's sexuality

From the earliest opportunity, reportage on the Knox case focused on the sexual element of Kercher's murder and, by weaving together anything that could be discovered about her sexual conduct, worked to implicate her in the sexual assault: this despite the fact that only Sollecito (trace of DNA on the bra clasp, disputed and discredited at appeal) and Guede (DNA on and inside Kercher's body) could be forensically linked to the sexual aspect of the attack.[14] One of the most familiar phrases associated with the case for some considerable time was 'sex game gone wrong'. Inevitably, this injected an overt message of sexual deviance and a subtext of bisexuality into the narrative (see below, pp. 175–6). The sense is exacerbated by the ubiquitous references to Kercher's body having been found 'semi-naked'; an unfortunate term that inevitably sexualises her (the term semi-clothed is equally accurate but far less titillating – precisely why, presumably, the press tends not to employ it).

The first reference to Kercher being murdered because of her refusal to take part in an orgy appeared two and a half weeks after her body was discovered, as the hypothesis emerged from the investigating officers: ‘Prosecutors believe she was murdered after refusing to take part in an extreme sex game’ (*MOL* 18 November 2007 3:57 PM). Meanwhile, *Time* magazine reported that public prosecutor Giuliano Mignini believed Knox had been ‘driven by sexual desire and alpha-female competitiveness’; he theorised that Knox ‘wanted a sex “game” and used her feminine wiles to manipulate two besotted young men [...] into restraining Kercher while she plunged a kitchen knife into her neck’. Mignini even reconstructed a possible monologue for Knox that once again works on the axis of virgin and whore: ‘You are always behaving like a little saint. Now we will show you. Now we will make you have sex’ (cited in Nadeau 2010, p. 29). The precise phrase ‘sex game gone wrong’ did not emerge for another five months (first used by the *Mail* in *MOL* 7 April 2008 12:26 PM), and was then picked up by newspapers, agencies and channels everywhere, quickly becoming almost as ubiquitous as ‘Foxy Knoxy’.

Carole Cadwalladr suggests: ‘If the world is confused about Amanda Knox – and judging from the acres of the newsprint and the vicious spats still ongoing between those who believe she’s guilty and those who insist she’s innocent – it’s perhaps because it’s still confused, and threatened, by young women’s sexuality’ (*Guardian* 9 October 2011). Whether confused, aroused, or both, elements of the media did seem to work themselves up into something of a frenzy over Knox’s sexuality. It may be that the intense focus on sex was in part due to a kind of culture clash between Italy and the US: in the Lifetime movie *Murder on Trial in Italy*, Knox is depicted walking through Perugia with her younger sister, Deanna, and pointing out the drug dealers sitting on the steps: ‘In Italy they say everything’s illegal and nothing is forbidden.’ The line is apparently lifted from a *Corriere della Sera* journalist (see Bachrach 2008), but it does capture something of the odd, vaguely schizophrenic side of Italian society and culture in terms of its Catholic heritage and its attitude towards ‘transgressive’ behaviour, particularly by women. Ellen Nerenberg, in her study of three famous murder cases in the country since the 1970s, notes how each ‘highlight[ed] transformations in contemporary Italian culture and society’, including ideas of the stability of family, ‘notions of Italian cultural autonomy from “foreign” influences, a plummeting birthrate, ramped-up violence among Italian youth, and public safety generally’ (Nerenberg 2012, p. 2). Early reports in local newspapers of the murder of Meredith

Kercher remarked upon both immigration and foreign students, lamenting the drug scene that had infected the ancient town (Burleigh 2011, pp. 169–70). Burleigh also believes this extended on a personal level, with a significant gulf between prosecutor Mignini and Knox: the 'fifty-seven [-year-old] conservative Catholic' and this representative of 'the digital-age party animals who trip through his hometown' (p. 170). Such suspicions about Italian society are not new, of course. It is no coincidence that many of the plays discussed in Chapter Two, notably *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Women Beware Women*, have Italianate settings: the city states of Italy in the early modern period had acquired a reputation for excess, corruption and sexual transgression, and on that account probably functioned as a useful analogue for the court of King James, which no writer would have been foolish enough to critique directly.[15]

Basic Instinct's most famous scene depicts Catherine Tramell undergoing interrogation (and a lie detector test) in an attempt to establish whether or not she is guilty of the murder of Johnny Boz, the character we see in the film's opening scene being stabbed to death by a mysterious blonde woman while they are having sex. Amanda Knox was, depending on which report one reads, questioned for anything between 5 and 14 hours before a garbled confession that implicated her was obtained. However, the differences between the two interrogations could hardly be more stark: Knox was presumably terrified, being grilled in a language which she did not speak or understand well and (by her account) being tricked, cajoled or coerced into signing a statement, again in Italian, without the benefit of legal counsel.[16] By contrast, in the famous interrogation scene in *Basic Instinct*, although Tramell is the one under attack, from the very beginning she is in full control of her male inquisitors.

What gives Tramell the advantage over her male inquisitors is her refusal to concede to them the moral high ground in terms of her behaviour, specifically with regard to recreational drugs and, more significantly, sex. The men are obviously shocked by Tramell's frank language and unashamed attitude and she, in turn, is only too pleased to assert her sexual power, and is unashamed when she prioritises her own carnal pleasure, stating plainly that she 'had sex with him [Boz] for about a year and a half [. . .] I liked having sex with him; he wasn't afraid of experimenting [. . .] I like men who give me pleasure'. As the scene proceeds, Tramell elaborates on her sexual adventures, turning up the heat on her interrogators (No, she did not tie him up, since 'Jonny liked to use his hands too much. I like hands and fingers'). She challenges

the double standard over sex for love and sex for physical enjoyment. While they judge her – 'You didn't love him, even though you were fucking him' – she refuses even to engage with their rules: 'You still get the pleasure.' By allowing her to parade her sexual autonomy, her transgressive nature and behaviour (sex, drugs), her lack of shame with regard to those transgressions, and her potential for danger (is she or is she not the killer?), the men's conflicted response – indignation and sexual desire – is exposed to full view.

During Knox and Sollecito's trial much attention was paid to testimony that Kercher had felt 'uncomfortable' about her flatmate keeping a vibrator and condoms in a transparent beauty case in the shared bathroom. It could be considered an unwise and unfortunate choice that Knox made, electing to request an opportunity to address the court at this particular point in the trial (spontaneous declarations from the accused are permitted under the Italian justice system). After taking a moment to declare her innocence, she proceeded to explain that the vibrator had been 'a present from a friend before I came to Italy. It was a joke. It's in the shape of a small rabbit and about 15cm long' (*MOL* 14 February 2009 1:24 AM). Most of the media reports added that the judge smiled at her indulgently after she had offered her explanation. However, the fact that Knox's first speech in court was about a sex toy was a disastrous move that compounded the impression that she had no idea of appropriate behaviour and discourse in the context of a murder trial. Knox, painfully aware of the media's keen interest in her sex life, implies in her memoir that she wanted to try to impose some counter-spin herself on the stories that had been accumulating around the issue of her sexual habits: 'I wasn't making excuses for the vibrator. I just wanted to put it into perspective – that it was a gag gift', and that 'Meredith had never complained about it to me' (Knox 2013a, p. 294).

Ironically, the press used her spontaneous declaration to further enhance the sexualised image they had been constructing. Rather than seeing the condoms as indicators of someone taking sensible precautions, and the vibrator as a 'joke', these items were simply noted as further confirmation of her promiscuity. *The Sun*, working like the *Mail* with copy filed by the journalist Nick Pisa (who covered much of the trial), ran with the headline, 'Knox: Why I had a rabbit sex toy at murder house' (*The Sun* 14 February 2009), again conflating her private sexuality with the killing of Meredith Kercher. Nor was such coverage limited to the tabloid press. The review of John Follain's book (2011) about the case in the left-leaning broadsheet *The Observer* describes

her as 'a narcissistic attention-seeker who was sexually adventurous but also jealous of Meredith Kercher's cheerful contentment. Knox knew, it seemed, no boundaries, leaving a vibrator in a transparent washbag and enjoying one-night stands' (Jones 2011). Which begs at least two questions: where exactly are we locating those boundaries? And, what century are we in again?

D'Cruze, Walklate and Pegg argue that 'the close association between women's moral status and their sexual chastity makes sexual deviance a recurrent theme and can indeed eroticise women's physical violence. Therefore not only will a woman who has murdered often be identified as sexually deviant, but also a sexually transgressive woman will be all the more readily accepted as capable of murder' (2006, p. 48). Crossing the real/fictive boundary again, it is clear that Hollywood, too, 'sees female violence as erotic and defines "erotic" within narrow parameters' (Holmlund 1993, p. 128), and nowhere is this more evident than in the fantasy-nightmare figure of Catherine Tramell. By a similar logical process, just as in the cases of Frances Howard (scandalous tales of her affairs at court) and Ruth Snyder (trysts at the Waldorf Hotel while her daughter rode the elevators), the potential for public interest in Knox's involvement in the murder of Meredith Kercher was enhanced by the sexual element. The prosecuting lawyers certainly took this principle to heart, as did many of the tabloid reporters, particularly in Italy and the UK, where she was described as, among many other things, '*una cacciatrice d'uomini, insaziabile a letto*' (a huntress of men, insatiable in bed) (Clark-Flory 2008).

This latter characterisation was attributed by a number of newspapers to the Italian press, specifically *Corriere della Serra*, although closer investigation reveals that the plangent phrases were lifted from the UK tabloid *News of the World*,[17] via a kiss-and-tell story interview with one of Knox's acquaintances, Elis Prenga (*Corriere* 25 November 2007). The Prenga interview actually does not read like journalism at all, but rather like a particularly tame soft porn story. For those familiar with the newspaper, this will not be a surprise, but in the context of the current study its unabashedly prurient tone may catch a reader unawares. The emphasis is on sexual adventurousness ('marathon sex session [...] First we gave each other oral sex at the same time [...] She wanted to try lots of positions') and on Knox as sexual aggressor: 'a wild animal in bed... [Knox is repeatedly compared to an animal]... she RIPPED off his clothes, GRIPPED him fiercely with her powerful hands and she BIT him roughly... She straddled me and was grasping my back so hard it hurt' (*News of the World* 25 November 2007, emphasis, it hardly needs saying,

in the original). One almost expects to read Elis recounting how Knox tied his arms to the bedposts.

In *Basic Instinct,* Tramell twice questions Detective Nick Curran (a recovering alcoholic and drug addict) about his cocaine use. ('Have you ever fucked on cocaine, Nick?' she asks him during the interrogation; 'It's nice.' Later, when she visits him at his apartment and he offers her a drink, she asks whether he has any 'coke'. Without skipping a beat, Nick replies, 'Got a Pepsi in the fridge'). From its earliest reporting, the *Daily Mail* chose to highlight the sense of Knox as deviant in terms of not only her sexual appetites, but also her indulgence in drugs and alcohol. Her Myspace page was scrutinised, with the reporters concluding that it 'gives a worrying insight into the bizarre life which has led the 20-year-old brunette to an Italian cell'. It mentions her visits to Amsterdam (remarking that she claims 'she did not smoke any cannabis') and Hamburg's red light district and goes on to note, rather laconically, 'Despite her apparent relationship with Mr. Sollecito, she lists herself as "single".' The following day's report elaborates the deviance narrative, picking up on a video clip of Knox, drunk, arguing with a friend over how much alcohol she has consumed. One might reasonably argue that video footage of an inebriated student could hardly be considered newsworthy on any level. Nevertheless, the image of a young American woman let off the leash to indulge in sex, alcohol and drugs seems in itself to be an intoxicating one. The *Mail*'s headline ran: 'Youtube video of "Foxyknoxy"[*sic*] drunk while at university'. The article concludes that '[t]he video appears to show an Amanda Knox far removed from the "studious, hard-working and talented" girl depicted by her fellow students at the University of Washington' (*MOL* 7 November 2007 4:29 PM). The report also carries a warning that the clip contains, 'anti-Semitic and explicit language', further enhancing the sense of transgression. Two days later, a photograph depicting Knox in a formal gown at a party in Seattle (probably fancy dress, judging by her fellow students) is opportunistically captioned 'Party people: Amanda Knox (left) often took men back to the flat she shared with Meredith Kercher'. The article concludes with discussion of several accounts of Knox's sexual partners: Juve, one of the barmen at Le Chic, said he walked her home sometimes 'but didn't have sex with her'; Stefano Bonassi, who lived in the flat below, 'told police Knox had sex with one of her [*sic*] friends' (*MOL* 9 November 2007 11:47 AM). There is also a reprise of the assertion from Sophie Purton, one of Kercher's friends, that 'Meredith told me that Amanda brought men back to their house – I don't know how many', information which had appeared as a headline

report the day before: ‘Meredith: Foxy Knoxy “brought strange men back to the house” ’ (*MOL* 8 November 2007 3:25 PM).

I have already noted that, as the first days went by, even Sollecito began to distance himself from Knox. A letter to his father leaked to the press described her in these terms: ‘She lived her life like a dream, she was detached from reality, she couldn’t distinguish dream from reality. Her only thought is the pursuit of pleasure at all times’ (*MOL* 24 November 2007 7:32 PM). The theme of Knox as promiscuous and hedonistic was picked up the next day from an interview with Lumumba. In a rather overheated article, journalist Antonia Hoyle imagines a crowded dance floor, ‘a flurry of bodies’, queues for cocktails and, ‘in the middle of it all’, Knox ‘whispering sweet nothings to her latest conquest, her chest pressed against his, their mouths just millimeters apart and seemingly unaware of the chaos ensuing around her’. It is a report that departs from journalistic fact and instead creates an imaginative space for a character constructed from Lumumba’s (understandably skewed) perspective, and deploys the kind of stereotypes of young women’s sexuality that have underpinned most of the coverage of Knox from the very beginning.

Indeed, the approach taken by many tabloid reporters in “researching” Knox’s sexual history, and the relish with which tales of Knox’s sexual exploits were then relayed, are familiar from customary tabloid coverage of celebrity lifestyles. According to one *Mail* report, a friend of Meredith Kercher had ‘helped turn police attention to Knox by telling them about her lovers’ (*MOL* 9 November 2007 11:47 AM). Another report quoted Meredith’s father John as having been told by his daughter that ‘Knox had been entertaining men within a week of arriving in the country’ (*MOL* 12 November 2007 2:11 PM). Such strategies – associating female promiscuity with sexual deviance – underpinned the discourse of prosecutors and judges as the police began to draw conclusions from forensic evidence and the autopsy. Many reporters followed suit, deploying the same kind of language and rarely if ever questioning the extent to which such claims were firmly evidence-based.

In the *Mail* interview of 25 November, Lumumba spoke of Knox’s time working at his bar Le Chic. ‘Every time I looked round she was flirting with a different guy’, he claimed and, seeing her with Sollecito, he remarked, ‘I couldn’t believe she was two-timing her American boyfriend.’ Meanwhile, Lumumba’s partner Aleksandra Kania, on the basis of one meeting with her, described her as someone ‘who would do anything to get her way, and her man’ (*MOL* 25 November 2007 1:01 PM). Kania’s line does raise questions about the relationship between the

press and the people they choose to interview, and the ways in which the interview process puts in train an escalation of the scandalous elements of the story. Like Prenga (discussed above, pp. 169–70), Kania seemed to have a good sense of what the tabloid reporters wanted to hear, and she was only too pleased to give it to them. In turn, the journalist is unlikely to discourage hyperbole or exaggeration when it adds spice to their copy; and so the wheel keeps turning . . .

It needs to be said that tabloid journalists were not the only ones to adopt this approach. Knox found herself depicted as a young woman out of control, transgressing accepted boundaries of female decency, pursuing her appetite for drink, drugs and sex in the liberated, limbo status of a student on a year abroad, and she attracted the opprobrium of broadsheet commentators too. The *Independent* catches Knox in a curious double-bind in this example:

> Her diaries have been leaked to the press and are minutely scrutinised for evidence of sexual deviancy. It is all prurient and intrusive but by no means irrelevant. For the question of Ms. Knox's sexual appetites, and how far she will go to gratify them, go to the heart of this disturbing case.
>
> (*Independent* 16 January 2009)

Peter Popham's statement not only takes for granted that Knox's sexual appetites are central to understanding the truth of the case; he also presumes that there is something unnatural about them in the first place. Meanwhile, NBC's webpage asks this oddly constructed question:

> Is Amanda Knox just too sexy for herself or is she a manipulating, narcissistic sociopath who for one terrible night gave in to a dark primal rage that boiled inside of her, one that may be responsible for her participating in the death of an otherwise innocent woman, a crime that could make Knox's place of residence an Italian prison cell until she is at least 42-years-old?
>
> (Van Zandt 2008)

Which does not appear to give Knox much of a choice: Am I too sexy? Or am I a narcissistic sociopath? Or am I in fact both? Whatever 'too sexy for herself' might mean, the options do not appear to give Knox much of a choice at all.

The exact circumstances of the leaking of certain pages of Knox's prison diary are not quite clear, but *Corriere della Sera* published them

in June 2008, and they proved damaging for Knox's reputation. The *Mail* reported that in the diary Knox 'details her many lovers and her fears that she may have contracted a sexually transmitted disease' (*MOL* 25 June 2008 1:51 AM). The article claims she lists 'seven lovers she had in Italy', although it later became clear that the list actually comprised all the lovers she had had in her life. One *Mail* reporter suggests it is 'bizarre' that Knox is puzzling over whether any of them could have infected her with HIV (*MOL* 28 June 2008 1:36 AM); however, it would later emerge that the list had been prompted by a routine HIV test carried out on Knox that had initially thrown up a false positive result. A prison doctor had consequently suggested she draw up the list. Nevertheless, the meme of Knox as a 'man-eater' continued to be reinforced by other sources such as Fiorenza Sarzanini's true crime account *Amanda and the Others* (published in November 2008), which reprinted the list and commented: 'It's as if you (Knox) were always hunting men. You list your conquests as if you were displaying them like trophies.' The *Mail* article quoting these excerpts from Sarzanini's book carried the headline 'Secret diary reveals Foxy Knoxy was "always thinking about sex" ' (cited in *MOL* 30 November 2008 4:47 PM).

The family's decision to hire PR specialist David Marriott to counter the negative coverage has been a controversial one; the firm's attempts to 'counter-spin' the story led to a sharpening of the divide between so-called pro- and anti-Knox opinion. There is also a sense of a retaliatory spiral as the police and prosecutors put their own spin on the facts, and drip-fed the media.[18] In this respect, the authorities' approach occasionally exacerbated the media obsession with the case. In turn, the international coverage of the case led to developing tensions and mutual suspicions (in particular, prejudiced and dismissive attitudes towards Italian justice in the US). While Marriott's firm worked hard to keep Knox's profile high in the US media, and continued to project their naïve tomboy version of her at every opportunity, there were moments when members of the family appeared to be voluntarily tossing spanners into the works of the publicity spin machine. Knox's stepfather Chris Mellas bizarrely elected to sport an 'I'm Foxy Knoxy's Mum's boytoy' T-shirt around the time of the first trial. Presumably it was intended as a riposte to the speculation around the impact on Knox's psyche of her parents' divorce and her mother's remarriage to a younger man (*MOL* 10 November 2007 8:04 PM) (see p. 163). In addition, in an episode of the US internet "shock jock" Strange Dave's radio show, while concluding an interview with Knox's aunt Janet Huff, Dave asks her if, on her release, Knox would agree to come on his radio show and 'become my

Foxy Knoxy' – Huff laughs and tells Strange Dave to 'get in line' behind all her other male admirers (YouTube 2010, 6m 27s).

Knox's memoir confronts the issue of her sexuality quite directly. Acutely aware of the Foxy Knoxy *persona*, she is at particular pains to challenge the idea that she was unusually promiscuous or careless in her sexual encounters. She insists that '[c]asual sex was, for my generation, simply what you did', but at the same time she implies that she was herself relatively inexperienced before leaving home for Italy, and that her close friends teased her about it (Knox 2013a, p. 32). She refers to herself as a late bloomer and as having 'gone on a campaign to have casual sex' when she left for Europe (p. 102). She also clarifies that the four sexual partners she had had in Seattle were all 'meaningful' relationships. She saw her Italian adventure as a way to turn her back on this: 'For me', she writes, 'sex was emotional and I didn't want it to be anymore [...] I wanted sex to be about empowerment and pleasure, not about *Does this person like me? Will he still like me tomorrow?* [emphasis in the original]' (p. 14). She details her sexual encounters with a man called Cristiano ('my first bona fide one-night stand' [p. 16]), whom she met while travelling with her sister Deanna from Milan to Florence and who, to her acute embarrassment and chagrin, gave her oral herpes (pp. 15–17, 23), and another man called Mirko (pp. 31–3). After having sex with the latter, she describes herself as feeling 'awkward and out of place' and adds, pointedly, 'I didn't yet know if I'd regret it. (Nor could I anticipate that my private, uncertain experiment would become my public undoing)' (p. 33), a point she makes again when she reflects on an encounter with another casual partner, Bobby, which inspires 'the same emptiness' (p. 59). She finds her flatmate Laura reassuring ('You're young and free-spirited. Don't worry about it') and Meredith consoling ('Amanda, [...] maybe uninvolved sex just isn't for you') (pp. 34, 35), thus implying an affinity with Kercher on such matters, challenging the construction of herself in the press as the whore to Kercher's virgin. 'I was a monster. Meredith was a saint,' she asserts, reflecting back on the news coverage; 'The truth was that we were very much alike' (p. 212).

Knox even notes that Meredith had asked if she could have a couple of the condoms stashed in Amanda's beauty case, clearly a rejoinder to reports that Kercher had been offended by the condoms and vibrator 'on display' in the shared bathroom (p. 93). The same strategy is apparent in the way Knox compares her relationship with Sollecito with Kercher's developing relationship with a young man called Giacomo ('Meredith had just started seeing Giacomo, as a boyfriend, and she and I joked that we were living parallel lives' [p. 56]). Her relationship with Sollecito

depicts a mutual infatuation and tenderness, and an implied innocence, where a washing ritual takes the place of sexual activity: ‘When we took a shower together, he washed my hair and then toweled me dry, even cleaning my ears with a Q-tip. To me, it was intensely tender; it felt as intimate as sex’ (p. 56). By contrast with her earlier hook-ups, the first time she has sex with Sollecito it feels ‘totally natural’ (p. 55).

Knox’s attempt to recuperate her sex life, which had been dragged mercilessly through a long, deep gutter by some significant elements of the media, is a telling example of the chastening effect of the relentless attacks she endured for her alleged promiscuity. An initial insistence that casual sex was *de rigueur* for her generation is followed by an account of the casual encounters she had. However, bravado gives way to a rejection of casual sex, a retreat and subsequently a valorisation of the relationship with Sollecito which, despite its fleeting nature, is understood as romantic and ‘natural’. In this respect, Knox’s story seems to suggest an internalisation of the kind of distinctions we still see predominant in our culture, even among young people: that a young woman who has sex with multiple partners, and without an emotional commitment, is a slut, while no such moral judgements attach to a young man exhibiting equivalent behaviour. Given Knox’s media predicament, it should not surprise us to find her struggling to reconcile herself to the expectations of the patriarchy.

Finally, it is worth pausing to consider the way in which some elements of the media chose to represent Knox in terms of her sexual orientation. It is perhaps no surprise that the question entered the discourse as she clocked up months and then years in prison, given the mythos that surrounds women behind bars, and typical representations in popular culture. Furthermore, lesbianism can often still operate as a cue for ‘explaining’ sexually deviant and sexually violent behaviour: Aileen Wuornos’s lesbianism and status as a prostitute emphasised her deviance, and connections were made between her sexuality and her targeting of male victims. The press paid close attention to Myra Hindley’s lesbian relationships in prison; Rose West’s bisexuality helped to embed the notion of her as another of the ‘monstrous feminine’ brigade (and when stories emerged of Hindley and West striking up a ‘close friendship’, it was a gift to the tabloids). Perhaps the most infamous case is the convicted Australian murderess Tracey Wiggington who, with three female accomplices, lured 47-year-old Edward Baldock into their car with the promise of sex, drove him to a deserted spot and stabbed him multiple times before drinking his blood. Wiggington was not just a killer but, according to reports, a man-hating vampire

(see Morrissey 2003, pp. 103–33). There is also a long tradition of representing lesbians in Hollywood film as psychopathic. Indeed, feelings about this particular cornerstone of Hollywood homophobia would form the basis of the rationale for gay and lesbian activists' protests against *Basic Instinct*, when a draft of the script leaked and ended up circulating among groups such as GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation), Queer Nation and ACT UP, before the film went into production (see Simkin 2013, pp. 29–32). Jonathan Katz, founder of Queer Nation, saw the character of Catherine Tramell as the next in a 'long line' of representations of 'the homicidal evil lesbian'.[19]

In the same way that, with Catherine Tramell, her bisexuality is not seen as a lifestyle choice but rather as an indicator of her sexual voracity, hints of lesbianism or bisexuality in representations of Knox are intended to do little more than feed the fire of the prurience that the paper's readership had become accustomed to. A long report on her prison diary in the *Daily Mail* dwells on her notes about a senior prison officer who has taken an inappropriate sexual interest in her (*MOL* 28 June 2008 1:36 AM). Working with leaked records of bugged conversations between Knox and her parents, the *Mail* also revealed 'how her cell mate begged her for sex', how a warder had 'also begged her for sex', and Knox's own conclusion: 'It's because I'm pretty and they all like me' (*MOL* 24 October 2008 3:54 PM). Of course, these reported requests for sex do not mean she had sex with them – in fact, Knox's evident discomfort indicates precisely the opposite. However, for the *Mail*, this was irrelevant; such titbits simply provided more salacious headlines, pandering to the penchant for lesbian sex, a staple of heterosexual pornography. It is entirely in keeping with the *Mail*'s coverage that its first report on *Waiting to Be Heard* is headlined ' "My guard wanted to know who I had sex with, how I liked it – and if I'd do it with him" ', and promises the reader (who presumably also wants to know the answer to some of these questions) a 'tantalising preview of Knox's tell-all book' (*MOL* 13 April 2013 10:00 PM).

Another grey area: Knox and her intertexts

In the final analysis, it is hard to imagine Knox being remembered in any way other than as Foxy Knoxy. We are too fond of our fictions to let go of such clear-cut characters and narratives. Liz Jones likens the case to 'a Donna Tartt novel or a teen horror movie. All the ingredients are here – the beautiful, privileged American college girl, the handsome nerdy boyfriend, the African bar owner (there has to be one person of

colour thrown into the mix)' (*MOL* 10 November 2007 5:58 PM). Certainly the case offered rich pickings for imaginative reconstructions in the media of film and TV fiction. Popular US TV legal drama *The Good Wife* included an episode ('Doubt', Season 1 Episode 18) that was clearly influenced by the Kercher murder in its first series. It originally aired on 6 April 2010, nine months before another US TV crime drama, *Lie to Me*, included an episode entitled 'Killer App' (Season 3 Episode 13, 31 January 2011) which featured a photograph of Amanda Knox in a sequence of shots of famous sex killers. The episodes indicate how the Kercher murder swiftly infiltrated popular culture and consciousness. *Lie to Me* offers only a fleeting glimpse of Knox, but the *Good Wife* episode is worth considering for the amount of parallels it allows with the murder of Meredith Kercher. The facts of the case, and the suppositions that they drag with them, allow considerable scope for the development of exciting narratives; on the other hand, the still unanswerable question of guilt or innocence can also lead filmmakers down blind alleys, as I will show in some further reflections on *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy*. Finally, I will consider a third intertext, the Hollywood horror film *Scream 4* (2011), which speaks to the case in much less specific terms, but which may illuminate the wider culture in which the murder of Meredith Kercher and its media coverage took place.

'Doubt' tells the story of a college student, Bianca Price, accused of shooting dead her sorority sister Heather Cross while under the influence of drugs and after indulging in a threesome with Heather and Bianca's boyfriend Josh Mundy. The murder took place upstairs while a crowd of fellow students partied downstairs; the gunshot brought some of them running, and they discovered Cross lying dead on the floor and Price kneeling beside her covered in blood. As in the Kercher murder, there are allegations that drugs are involved (Josh refers to the use of the tranquiliser Zolpidem, famous for allegedly having been used by Tiger Woods to enhance sexual pleasure) and the death resulting from the encounter is clearly, at least on the surface, a version of the idea of the 'sex game gone wrong'. The episode also features a prominent role for Bianca's mother, who is presented in a manner not unlike Edda Mellas, herself familiar from the many TV appearances she has made over the years. When defence attorney Alicia Florrick (the series' central character, played by Julianna Margulies) cross-examines Mundy, there are references to some of Zolpidem's side-effects, memory loss and diarrhoea, both of which connect with the Kercher case.[20]

Price herself remains difficult for the audience to read. In some respects, she acts almost like an anti-Knox. While Knox generated an

over-abundance of ways in which she could be interpreted, the Price character gives little away, with only brief isolated scenes to display her close relationship with her mother or her terror at the prospect of a 45-year prison sentence. Defence attorney Will Gardner (Josh Charles) remarks that after 15 years in the business he still cannot tell who is innocent and who is guilty and adds: 'Everyone's a mystery from the outside, including Bianca.'

The Bianca Price trial is resolved finally in a rather tortuous fashion, as is common with the genre. Florrick, Gardner and Agos discover convincing proof of Price's innocence: in another nod, perhaps, to the Kercher case, it appears Cross and Mundy had a motive ulterior to the sex game: they were in the process of burgling Price's room when Cross found the pistol in a drawer, and, due to a hair trigger mechanism on the gun, accidentally shot herself as she went to snatch it from its resting place. Although they have proof and the testimony of a ballistics expert witness, Gardner complains: 'The problem is, it's not a good story. It's just a freak accident. There are no villains. [...] It may be true but it doesn't *sound* true.' By contrast, he continues, the prosecution (like Mignini) have a villain (Price/Knox) and a motive (jealousy, common in both narratives). Furthermore, offering a new version of events (a second alibi?) that contradicts the story given earlier in the trial risks weakening the defence. Price chooses to go with the revised story, but her case is undermined in dramatic fashion when it is revealed under cross-examination that the defence team's ballistics expert has slept with one of the partners in the defence lawyers' firm. As Gardner fumes later, it wasn't humdrum ballistics, it was *sex*, and 'the jury ate it up'. In life as in art, sex sells. In the wake of this debacle, Price is left to consider again whether to stick to her plea of not guilty or bargain for a sentence of second degree murder and a reduced sentence of ten years. After a prolonged debate, the jurors arrive at their unanimous decision, but they are interrupted at that moment by the judge, who reports that Price has opted for a plea bargain: she has taken the reduced sentence, despite the fact that it appears to the viewer that she must be innocent. As the bemused and weary jurors leave the room, the slips of paper on which they wrote their decisions are dropped into the waste-bin. Every one of them reads 'Not Guilty'.

The episode is a clever meditation on aspects of the judicial process. It reflects on the issue of reasonable doubt (one of the jurors remarks, 'All we have is reasonable ignorance'), and there is a sad irony in the conclusion: a young woman not guilty, about to be set free by a jury convinced of her innocence, cowed (in part by her mother's terror at

the prospect of a 45-year sentence) into effectively professing her guilt for a crime she did not commit, is jailed. In the end, it would seem, what is important is not necessarily the truth, but what *sounds* true, as the character of Garner puts it. The truth is displaced by the more convincing narrative.

In terms of convincing narratives, the Lifetime movie cable TV version of events, *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy*, turned out to be twice as awkward as its nonsensical title in its muddled attempt to make sense of Knox's story. Fatally hamstrung by a refusal to commit in terms of Knox and Sollecito's guilt or innocence, it shuttles backwards and forwards like an episode of *Cold Case* between the present (the discovery of the body, the investigation, the trial) and the past (Knox preparing to leave her home in Seattle, Knox and Kercher meeting and getting to know one another, Knox and Sollecito's whirlwind romance, complete with pastoral picnic idyll). In the style of US TV crime shows, many of the flashbacks are shot bleached out, the faded colours and bluish tint used to indicate testimony which the audience is meant to understand as conjectural, with a conventional colour palette used for less controversial past moments such as Knox and Kercher discussing the American's hygiene habits, or Knox and Sollecito meeting at a classical music concert.

However, the film, for all its apparent neutrality, is unable to keep two opposing versions of the facts in play simultaneously. The interrogation scene seems to favour Knox's argument that she was fooled and pressured into a confession. We are also left to puzzle over scenes where Knox says to Sollecito, 'Well, we have nothing to hide, right?' as they consider leaving Perugia for the weekend, and another where they lie in bed together while Knox muses upon the fact that 'my roommate's dead and I'm in the middle of a murder investigation. Life's just so random, you know?' It may be that such lines are intended to capture the inanity of contemporary discourse (or of Knox's infamous email to her family and friends back in Seattle), but in the context of a screenplay, the lines simply sound false and unintentionally comical. Once or twice, the film seems to be trying to emulate a *Rashomon*-style structure, as when it shows Guede's discredited version of the events. This might have made for an intriguing (and probably less controversial) movie; instead the film seems to be insisting on a claim of even-handedness while smuggling by its audience a version of Knox familiar from US TV documentaries slanted to assume her innocence. The one convincing moment is when Arlene Kercher, Meredith's mother, catches Edda Mellas's eye across the courtroom in the wake of the guilty verdicts,

and the film is suddenly illuminated by the one incontrovertible fact of the case: Meredith Kercher's death, and the devastating impact on her friends and family.

Far more interesting than the film itself was the publicity campaign that went along with it, where a similar sense of 'having it both ways' perhaps pointed to some of the raw nerves that the mere existence of the film had exposed in both the Knox camp and the Kercher family. Hayden Panettiere, inevitably, was asked whether she believed Knox was innocent, and found herself perched on an uncomfortable cleft stick, amidst overtones that are reminiscent of the spin that shaped the media representation of Knox's guilt or innocence. An early promotional interview finds Panettiere flannelling: 'This wasn't a dark, angry girl. She was a young girl with dreams and aspirations. I don't think guilty or innocent takes away from that' (*MOL* 8 January 2011 5:39 AM). And while her acute awareness of the potential for controversy reins her in, Panettiere is explicit in another interview shortly afterwards: 'My job is to play innocent.' Perhaps in response to the angry questions arising from both sides – family of the victim as well as the accused and her family[21] – Panettiere modified her language in later interviews. 'So', she told her interviewer, 'what I really tried to do, because it was very much a challenge to portray someone that you didn't know whether they were innocent or guilty, [was] to just embody what I saw of her as her personality, her aura, you know, what came across in court' (Popeater.com 2011). And by this time, the layering of realities has become quite bewildering. One wonders how Panettiere herself managed to identify this elusive 'personality' or even more ephemeral 'aura' without making at least a provisional decision about guilt or innocence.

Another layer appears courtesy of a film starring Panettiere that was released a couple of months after *Murder on Trial in Italy* was first broadcast. *Scream 4* was the final instalment (one would hope) in Wes Craven's postmodern horror franchise, a witty take (at least it was for two instalments) on the teen slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s. Set ten years after the events of the original *Scream* movie, *Scream 4* takes the series' pastiche, meta-cinematic tendencies to a new level: the opening scene depicts the terrorisation and murder of two young women in a home setting that reproduces the first killing of the original film, but with two victims (double the fun); this is then revealed as the opening scene of *Stab 6* (an imaginary franchise based on the original Woodbury murders that form the basis of the 'real' movie *Scream*), which two more high school students are watching. Chloe (Kristen Bell) then knifes Rachel (Anna Paquin) in the stomach as they sit on the sofa, complaining she

talks too much, and this in turn is revealed to be the opening scene of *Stab 7*. The two characters watching *this* video are then stalked and killed by the same Ghostface villain: we are finally in the realm of the 'real', and we have five young women knifed to death before the opening credits roll.

Scream 4 is presumably precisely the kind of film Liz Jones had in mind when she mused on the similarity between the Kercher murder case and 'a teen horror movie' (*MOL* 10 November 2007 5:58 PM). The film stakes a claim for representing the current generation, smartphoned and facebooked; it also manages to have fun with celebrity culture along the way as it gradually reveals the motivation behind the latest spate of murders.[22] The killings are carried out for the most part in the *Scream*/Ghostface tradition, with the majority of the young women being butchered with a large knife, a convention familiar from the preceding instalments.

The murderer's phone threats are ratcheted up from *Scream*'s 'Hang up on me again and I'll gut you like a fish' to 'I am going to slit your eyelids in half so you don't blink when I stab you in the face'. In keeping with the trajectory of horror films of the noughties, the violence in *Scream 4* is very graphic, though it lacks the degree of sadism that marks out films like the multiple instalments in the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises; the death of Sherrie in particular is gruesomely reminiscent of Kercher's murder, with the character stabbed in the throat, sliding down the wall, handprint trailing. All the slayings are brutal in this movie, often prolonged, and the amount of blood spilt is copious. As in many torture porn films (a genre that a character archly dismisses in the opening scene), the body is reduced to a piece of meat; after Olivia has been murdered by Ghostface, her bedroom is streaked with blood – walls, door, lamp, bedside table – and there is a shot of her lying on the bed in a foetal pose, her intestines ripped from her torso. Other killings include a knife plunged into a forehead and a stabbing in the back through a letterbox. Almost all the stabbings are followed by the victim spewing blood.

Scream 4, then, operates as a different kind of intertext from the Lifetime movie or the episode of *The Good Wife* discussed above. The connections are less direct, but they resonate nevertheless. The Massei report's judgement on the killing of Meredith refers to the murder as 'purely casual' (*MOL* 4 March 2010 5:15 PM). In *Scream 4*, the murders, their representations, and the way they accumulate randomly and with little or no individual impact convey something else about the culture in which Kercher lived and died. As one of the characters says within the first minute of the film, complaining about torture porn, 'it's just

body parts ripping and blood spewing'. There is no character development or even engagement with those characters. It speaks of a world where the realities of living and dying are replaced by endless loops of the most violent deaths; films within films; repeatedly distanced, and with a dulling sense of repetition (it is no surprise to find YouTube users compiling all the death scenes from films such as *Scream* and *Saw* into ten-minute sequences and uploading them. Equally it is no surprise to find such compilations are entirely devoid of any power). At the same time, the film attempts to maintain its humorous tone throughout, the murder scenes frequently glossed with intertextual references. This renders the violence curiously indifferent, offering empathic identification with each victim to the audience with one hand and snatching it back with the other. As Sherriff Dewey Riley remarks, 'One generation's tragedy is the next one's joke.' For the publicist promoting Sidney's book about the original Woodbury murders, the news of two students slain is greeted with glee – 'Yes! It's true. Two girls butchered. Payday!' By a grim coincidence with all this, Kercher was snapped on Halloween (the night before she died) made up as a vampire, with two fellow revellers (Figure 4.7); Meredith is on the left of the photograph, a man wearing a

Figure 4.7 Picture of Meredith Kercher in fancy dress on Halloween night, 2007

police helmet and brandishing a toy gun is on the right. In the centre, the distinctive mask of Ghostface, blood-streaked, stares vacantly back at the camera.

Finally, one more film was made specifically about the murder of Meredith Kercher, but with a very different purpose. Despite a reported budget of 182,000 euros (about £150,000 or $250,000) (*Daily Telegraph* 1 May 2012), this was not the provenance of Cable TV true crime movies, or slick US TV drama, but something much closer to the court case itself, and with much more significant ramifications. As the prosecution presented its closing arguments in the trial of Knox and Sollecito in November 2009, co-prosecutor Manuela Comodi introduced a computer-generated animated film of Kercher's murder as the prosecution team understood it to have unfolded. The film ran for 20 minutes. Knox recalls in her memoir the moment it was screened, and notes that although she chose not to watch it, her lawyers told her that the film depicted her in a striped shirt like one she wore often in court. The figures were reportedly given distinct facial expressions – Guede, Sollecito and Knox 'sneering', Kercher showing 'horror and pain' (Knox 2013a, p. 355). Nadeau reports that real images of Kercher's wounded body were superimposed on the animation at crucial points, such as a shot of Knox 'grabbing Meredith's throat and then shoving the palm of her hand against Meredith's chin to push her against the wall, knocking her unconscious'; the actual shots of Kercher's bruises showed how they matched the size and shape of Knox's hand (Nadeau 2010, p. 160).

Nina Burleigh describes the video briefly in her account of the trial and draws attention to the stereotypical nature of the avatars created for the three alleged perpetrators – 'Raffaele's avatar wore glasses, Rudy's was black, Amanda's was curvaceous'– the geek, the black villain, the *femme fatale*. She also notes that while the film depicted all three of them cornering Kercher, 'Amanda alone clawed at the poor English girl's face and stabbed the kitchen knife into her neck' (Burleigh 2011, p. 276). Once again, everything revolved around Knox. Although not entered as evidence (and so never subsequently seen by anyone outside the court), Knox was sure that the film had helped plant an indelible image in the minds of the members of the jury (Burleigh 2011, p. 356), and it is easy to understand why she might have reached that conclusion. By all accounts, the prosecution's movie audaciously spliced fact and supposition in a way not too dissimilar from the approach the press had adopted since the day the murder was discovered. The frames of the reconstruction were rendered in such a way that it would suture a viewer into its reality. Just like Knox, gurgling and gagging in her court testimony as

she imagined Kercher's death, we are all too familiar with the cop procedural, with *CSI* and its clones, with legal dramas like *The Good Wife*, complex editing of flashbacks and *Rashomon*-style competing versions of the 'truth'. Just as sophisticated CGI photorealism has made it impossible for a viewer to distinguish between the real and the simulation in a typical Hollywood blockbuster, so this short film's incorporation of real autopsy images into what can only be an imagined chain of events makes it difficult to be sure where evidence ends and supposition begins (Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9).[23]

In the end, what both this and the TV movie *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* reveal is one of the most significant elements of the impact of crime-as-entertainment culture, and that is the way the real and the fictive blur and begin to merge: the *femme fatale*, her unsuspecting male quarry, the innocent victim. These are familiar reference points for most of us. Outside the apartment on the morning Kercher's body was discovered and then in court, Knox was always a character, always 'on stage', or, at least, on camera: as I have discussed, the images of her embracing and kissing Sollecito as the police investigated the

Figure 4.8 Amanda Knox enters court for the committal hearing, 26 September 2008 (Pier Paolo Cito/Press Association Images)

Figure 4.9 Screenshot from the scene recreating the moment in *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* (screen capture)

crime scene were flashed around the world and swiftly interpreted – and not in Knox's favour. It could also be said that Knox's own penchant for story-telling – including conflicting accounts of her own actions and whereabouts on the night of the murder and accusations of being struck by police offers during questioning – enhance further the sense of performance that has surrounded the trial. As the days went by, the overwhelming sense of Knox as an actor in her own drama became hard to shake. Nick Pisa described her arrival at court in these terms: 'She made her entrance like a Hollywood diva sashaying along the red carpet' and 'smiled serenely as [she] shook hands with her legal team' (*MOL* 19 January 2009 11:45 AM), and *Murder on Trial in Italy* did its best to recreate that moment as precisely as possible, even down to the news reporter's commentary ('Foxy Knoxy swept into court like an invitee to a gala event'). Once again, the line between the 'real' and the simulation blurs: the Lifetime movie seems, in (at least) one sense, strangely redundant. The real drama had already played out in front of a global audience via a multitude of TV channels, newspapers, blogs and YouTube clips, and the star of the show had been Amanda Knox herself. Furthermore, the movie's earnest attempts at precise reconstruction of those already-oh-so-familiar moments (Figures 4.8 and 4.9) simply underline the fact that not only have we already seen this one, but we know the ending, too.

All of these women's stories share some common features. By allegedly participating in acts of violence with some kind of sexual motive or sexual element subsumed in the incident, each one of them prompted the strongest reactions in the patriarchy, rendered anxious and provoked to retaliate when confronted by the concept of a beautiful, deadly woman. Most importantly, the process that played out following their implication in their supposed crimes has interesting and important things to say about identity – how it is constructed and resisted; how it can be enforced, or challenged or subverted. In the conclusion, I will consider the idea of and authoring and *self*-authoring identity, and assess how this may have impacted on the significance and the evolution of the *femme fatale* meme in the wake of their individual crimes.

Conclusion

'How long have I beheld the devil in crystal?'

In Rome, a woman stands on trial for the murder of her husband. In court, her reputation is shredded; she is paraded as a whore and a devil; the contrast between her beautiful physical appearance and her spiritual corruption is a theme her judge-turned-prosecutor Cardinal Monticelso returns to obsessively; he also points to her 'impudence' and 'scorn' of the court as further evidence of her guilt. Her private letters are scrutinised for more clues and read out in court. Foreign ambassadors looking on voice their unease at the prosecutor's venomous attack on the defendant in murmured asides to one another: while the French Ambassador notes how 'She hath lived ill', the Englishman retorts, 'True, but the Cardinal's too bitter' (*The White Devil*, 3.2.107–8). Meanwhile, Monticelso points a steady finger at the defendant and concludes: 'If the devil/ Did ever take good shape, behold his picture' (3.2.216–17). Although attempts to implicate her in the death of her husband Camillo ultimately fail, Vittoria Corombona is convicted of what are, effectively, sex crimes, and is sentenced to imprisonment in a house for penitent whores.

In another part of Italy, some 400 years later, a young woman stands accused of participating in the sexual assault and murder of her female flatmate. As the case creeps through the courts over a two-year period, the Italian press describes the accused as '*la luciferina*' – a devil with an angel's face. To lawyers seeking her conviction, she is a 'she-devil, focused on sex, drugs and alcohol' (*Daily Mirror* 28 November 2009). Meanwhile, reports in some aspects of the foreign press remain unconvinced of her guilt and voice unease at a judicial system they find unfamiliar, and worry over the impact of the media coverage on the

court processes, in particular the effect of such a media firestorm on an unsequestered jury. On 4 December 2009, she is found guilty and sentenced to 26 years in jail.

Vittoria is the eponymous heroine of John Webster's tragedy *The White Devil*, but she is also an historical character: Vittoria Accoramboni's first husband was murdered to facilitate her marriage to the Duke of Bracciano, in a manner very similar to the events portrayed in Webster's play; Vittoria was assassinated in 1585, and her Websterian counterpart perishes in similar circumstances. As she dies, she laments, 'O, my greatest sin lay in my blood; / Now my blood pays for 't' (5.6.239–40) (see pp. 88–90). Christina Luckyj points out that Vittoria does not fit the mould of the wrongly accused woman, in the tradition of Desdemona (*Othello*) and Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*). Overt sexuality is a keynote of Vittoria's character; even more pertinently, she is deeply implicated in the crimes of which she stands accused (Luckyj 1999, p. 218). Nevertheless, the arraignment scene operates not to *establish* Vittoria's guilt but to *parade* her guilt and shame (as Monticelso hopes) on stage for all to see. Webster's audience may well have interpreted Vittoria's attempt to defend herself against Monticelso's accusations as inappropriate behaviour, simply by virtue of the fact that she was speaking out in public. And for speaking out, Monticelso condemns her: 'She scandals our proceedings' (3.2.129). Like all the women in this book, Vittoria is condemned as much for her duplicity as for her evil actions: masking her sin with the outward show of great beauty lights the fuse of suspicion and paranoia. However, her attempt to challenge the image of her that the patriarchy chooses to project is apparently unforgivable.

The laughing Medusa

I have returned repeatedly in the course of this study to the figure of Medusa as an incarnation of the *femme fatale*, in particular for the way she embodies beauty and danger and touches on particular male fantasies and fears. In her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), Hélène Cixous challenges the 'phallogocentrism' of Western culture – that is to say, the way in which all language, oral and written, has traditionally been rooted in the values of the patriarchy: 'Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis', she writes; 'it has been one with the phallocentric tradition' (1975, p. 879). Cixous puts up a rallying cry for women to challenge that tradition: women

'only have to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning', she writes. 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (p. 885). The laughter is not only a challenge to phallocentrism, but is an utter rejection of the terms of the debate: a mock. For Cixous, Medusa is not the snake-haired creature with the petrifying stare, feared by 'the trembling Perseuses. Moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes [talismans to ward off evil]' (p. 885). Instead, she is the mortal of the myth's first page: Cixous redeems the Medusa that Ovid tells us was a woman of renowned beauty, 'the jealous hope / Of many a suitor, and of all her charms / Her hair was loveliest' (*Metamorphosis*, Book 4, 883–85) (Ovid 1986, p. 98). Viewed in this way, Medusa retains her potential as a powerfully subversive myth.

In the nostalgic-for-the-eighties high school comedy *Easy A* (2010), quirky teen Olive (Emma Stone), in a mischievous moment, lies to a girlfriend about her weekend, inventing a passionate encounter with an imaginary guy to whom she lost her virginity. In fact, Olive spent the entire weekend at home alone. However, by a process Olive terms the 'Accelerated Velocity of Terminological Inexactitude', within moments the story has spread – via text, Facebook and good, old-fashioned gossip – and Olive finds herself the centre of male interest and female opprobrium . . . for women, of course, have historically internalised those categories of virgin and whore, too.[1] Inspired by the classroom text *The Scarlet Letter*, Olive chooses to play up to the utterly false *persona* she has unwittingly constructed. She watches, half amused and half horrified, as the new, entirely fictitious version of herself is fabricated and elaborated in the eyes of her fellow students. Her performance of shameless promiscuity, by being founded on precisely nothing, reveals how eagerly society laps it up and explodes the myth from the inside.

Such radical challenges can occur whenever women actively resist the stories that are routinely told about them, and the categories to which they are assigned. It may be that identities are largely shaped by ideological forces (see pp. 42–3), and, as I have shown, the women I have studied have been subjected to extraordinary pressures of that kind, fashioned in the image of the fears and desires of the patriarchy. The forms that emerge may bear only a ghost of a resemblance to the women who lived those lives, but the intense force of those ideological pressures means they appear as brilliant diamonds – 'devil[s] in crystal'.

In the context of a society where, for centuries, women have had their identities constructed for them, the decision to author one's own identity is a uniquely challenging one; it is also, potentially, uniquely

empowering. On the other hand, as Foucault might warn us, it is not always easy to distinguish between what we think we are determining for ourselves, and what is already determined for us. In Beaumont and Fletcher's remarkable Jacobean play *The Maid's Tragedy* (?1610), the heroine Evadne, concubine to the king, is forced to marry her brother Melantius's best friend Amintor, but refuses to sleep with him because of her obligation to the monarch. Shaped first as the king's consort, she is now expected to take on the role of chaste and faithful wife. But she fails to match her husband's expectations: discovering she is not the virgin he had expected, he is shocked – and mocked – by Evadne in her immortal riposte, 'A maidenhead, Amintor, at my years?' (2.1.173) – a line one might imagine on the lips of Frances Howard. When he is informed, Melantius convinces his sister that the king has dishonoured her and her family, and that he must die. Evadne, now taking on the role of avenger fashioned for her by her brother, ties the king to his bed as he sleeps, and when he wakes, arousal (*femme*) turns to fear (*fatale*) as she presents her dagger to him. 'How's this, Evadne?' he stammers, uncomprehending. 'I am not she', she spits back. 'Nor bear I in this breast / So much cold spirit to be called a woman. I am a tiger, I am anything / That knows not pity' (5.1.62–6). She is beauty turned Fury, goddess of vengeance – another terrifying female icon to set next to Medusa. In tigress mode, Evadne stabs him repeatedly as he lies bound to the bed: 'Thus, thus, thou foul man, / Thus I begin my vengeance' (5.1.98–9).

In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine Tramell, another woman handy with restraints and sharp implements, escapes justice by a skilful (or, rather, unfeasibly omnipotent) manipulation of all those around her – her former lover Beth, Nick Curran, and the rest of the San Francisco police force. In the interrogation scene, Tramell, by uncrossing her legs to expose her vagina to the assembled company of men, takes on the dimensions of the Freudian version of the Medusa: as Eva C. Keuls notes, analysing ancient Greek vase paintings, in the typical image of Medusa, 'the snakes around the open mouth [...] are suggestive of pubic hair' (Keuls 1985, p. 39). The vagina/Gorgon represents the fear of castration but the spectacle is also petrifying: for Freud, the 'sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone'; struck dumb with fear, at the same time the erection reminds the male that 'he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact' (Freud 1959, p. 105). One could hardly imagine a more appropriate metaphor to express the conflicted urges of desire and terror that the *femme fatale* provokes in the unwary male.

'Afraid of Losing Myself': Authoring identities

Catherine Tramell, modern multi-tasking woman that she is, crams a good deal into her schedule: between clubbing, enthusiastic consumption of recreational drugs, sex with the various men and women in her life and the occasional murder, she manages a highly successful career as a writer of crime fiction. And authorship is key to her success in preventing the San Francisco Police Department from pinning anything on her. Part of her alibi is that she would hardly have written novels about murder and then gone on to commit those crimes in real life, since she would have been announcing herself as the killer. Of course, it's a double bluff: Tramell *is* the killer, but the bluff works, and everyone except Detective Nick Curran is convinced of her innocence (and he, too, comes to believe her, just as those closest to him, his former lover Beth and his cop partner Gus, are becoming increasingly suspicious and try to warn him off). Tramell authors for herself a number of different roles – ice queen/red hot lover, vulnerable victim/vicious killer, straight/lesbian – which in effect render her essentially unknowable, certainly for the cop on her trail, if not for the audience. It is by keeping her identity in flux that Catherine is able to avoid attempts by the police to pin her definitively to the murders.

Amanda Knox was less clever, or less fortunate. Her own foray into creative writing was a story about a rape, 'Baby Brother', written as a class assignment and then posted on her MySpace website, where it was found by investigative reporters. There was no alibi here, no 'advance defence mechanism', as the psychologist Dr Lamott fussily describes Tramell's strategy of constructing her own alibi: in classic intentional fallacy mode, Knox's story was eagerly interpreted as a key to understanding her behaviour on that night in Perugia. Taken together with the other materials laid out on her social networking pages, versions of Knox were pieced together from the words and images littered there, shaped, of course, by the developing narrative of sexual assault and murder. The tension between the past and the immediate present is even more acute around sites such as Facebook and MySpace than it is around the internet in general. Like the Vancouver kiss image, fleeting moments frozen in time allow for multiple interpretations that accumulate as time goes by, and the same goes for text: yesterday's earnest but drunken status update is today's squirming embarrassment. Social networking sites demand a constant performance of identity (or, more accurately, identities) on a kind of personality treadmill, while they also open up the gap between the real self and the aspirant self – the difference between

what we are and what we would like to be (or what we would like others to believe we are). Further, the Facebook self tends to be in a perpetual state of being 'narrativised': it is a place where the subject makes sense of herself and her day-to-day encounters and events, all lived out – at least potentially – in full view of a host of her internet 'friends'. One study of social networking highlights the gap between the authentic and the fictive selves in these terms: 'The Facebook selves appeared to be highly socially desirable identities individuals aspire to have offline but have not yet been able to embody for one reason or another' (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin 2008).

Press, media and investigators have shown little interest in the complexities of the psychology of internet-based social networking. Knox's pages were combed for clues as to her character, and images of her drunk (out of control), pulling faces (bizarre), a light-hearted if tasteless image of her behind the tripod of an antique machine-gun (a penchant for violence), as well as a formal, studio-style portrait shot of her dressed in black (*femme fatale*), were endlessly reproduced, along with the short YouTube video clip of Knox clearly inebriated. Stories of her supposed deviousness were illustrated with a photo of her with eyes half-closed; tales of wild parties were accompanied by a shot of her in that context, and so on. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine Tramell essentially writes herself and those around her a narrative, managing to get away with murder several times by scripting the roles and actions of those she comes into contact with, framing an innocent woman for the killings and escaping to enjoy (yet another) enthusiastic sex scene in the final sequence with the cop who had been investigating her, while keeping her ice-pick handy under the bed. Unlike the fantasy figure Catherine Tramell, Knox had no control over the Amandas being fashioned out of her social networking pages.

There is another layer to the interaction of the real and the fictive *femme fatale*. In fiction – whether that takes the form of prose, drama, film or some other creative medium – the authors of the fictive text in question work with varying degrees of awareness of the conventions within which they are operating. Barbara Stanwyck's depiction of Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* contrasts tellingly with the arch-bordering-on-camp performance of *femme fatale*-ness embodied in Sharon Stone's performance as Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*. Stone is aware and very playful with the conventions, and her performance is further inflected by the director's wish to offer an *homage* to Kim Novak's character Madeleine Elster in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). To take this one step further, however, one could also point to Stone's own strategy of blurring

the line between her 'real' self and her screen *persona* as she made the promotional rounds to publicise the film: ushering Medusa into 1990s Hollywood, she commented to one interviewer, 'If you have a vagina and a point of view, that's a deadly combination' (cited in Sheff 1992). Ever conscious of the utility of performance, Stone deliberately carried over aspects of Catherine Tramell into the interviews, press conferences and publicity junkets around the promotion of the movie.

If the actresses portraying the fictive lethal women operate with varying degrees of awareness of the archetype, with a conscious gesture towards the gap between performer and character, this is intensified in the case of 'real life' *femme fatales* such as Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox, since the stakes are so much higher. For these women, the gap is not between performer and fictive role, but between their own 'authentic' lived experience and the roles scripted for them by the expectations and assumptions of the wider culture: assumptions informed by dominant cultural stereotypes like the black widow, the siren and the *femme fatale*. Marsh and Melville note that 'the narrative within the media is in essence a form of story telling' and that 'News and the selling of newspapers [...] is reliant on a number of "stock stories" that follow a well-established path' (2009, p. 78). This was certainly the case for Ruth Snyder, for whom the New York tabloid press shaped a variety of *personae* – the 'bloody blonde', the 'marble woman', the irresponsible, heavy-drinking, promiscuous flapper. Snyder consequently found herself challenged (or invited) to take up the role of sensational celebrity criminal, to live up to the depictions of her as a dangerously seductive woman apparently imbued with total control over her lover Judd Gray. Set against this was the image of abused wife, loving mother and dutiful daughter constructed by her own legal team, and, from a different trajectory again, the *persona* of her own 'real' self, attempting to negotiate a path somewhere between.

If a sense of the 'real' Amanda Knox was what the press was trying so hard to fix, then it is no surprise to find her leaked prison diary being seized upon to provide some answers. Reportedly passed from the authorities to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in June 2008, they included Knox's own reflection in poetry on her adoption as celebrity murderess: 'Do you know me? Open your eyes and see that when it is said I am an angel, or I am a devil, or I am a lost girl, recognize that what is really lost is: the truth!' (*Daily Telegraph* 24 June 2008). As the case proceeded, in a pattern familiar from celebrity scandal, Knox was caught in a cycle of spin and counter-spin. Just as in Snyder's defence, a safe, domesticated, faithful wife and mother was constructed and

projected in an attempt to counter the scheming murderess persona (see Marling 1998, p. 151), so the Gogerty-Marriott PR version of Knox was the desexualised, hard-working, sporty young woman fond of hiking and climbing, her inappropriate behaviour in the courtroom explained away as quirkiness: 'Amanda just being Amanda', as friends and family repeatedly put it (*MOL* 9 December 2009 9:55 AM). But this Amanda was, to all intents and purposes, simply too late to the party. What good to the media was a hippy tomboy when they already had a promiscuous, out of control, scheming *femme fatale*?

'An Adventure of Selfhood'

In *The Maid's Tragedy*, Evadne's bold tigress *persona* cannot hold. As so often in these early modern revenge tragedies, she internalises the shame heaped upon her by Melantius. 'Sure I am monstrous,' she declares in soliloquy. 'For I have done those follies, those mad mischiefs,/ Would dare a woman' (4.1.184–6). Having submitted to the king's construction of her, and subsequently to her brother's identification of her first as a vicious revenger and then as a 'stale whore' (4.1.151), she returns from slaughter to present a new version of herself to Amintor: 'Am I not fair?' she asks as she stands before him streaked in the king's blood. 'Looks not Evadne beauteous with these rites now?' (5.3.118–19). But Amintor – horror-struck, petrified, his mind full of snakes – rejects her: 'Black is thy colour now, disease thy nature.' (5.3.135). She is recast once more, as a 'monster of cruelty' this time (5.3.158), and, swiftly accepting this new *persona* (and once again speaking of herself in the third person, as is her habit), she turns the bloody knife against her own breast: 'Evadne whom thou hat'st [hatest] will die for thee' (5.3.171). Her words echo around an empty stage; Amintor has already abandoned her.

Frances Howard aside, we know that each of the women studied in this book made attempts at authoring their own identities and narratives in response to the extraordinary circumstances in which they found themselves, Smith in her letters and her declaration to the court, and Snyder in her projection of herself as good wife and mother and, through her ghost-written prison diary, the sorrowful penitent. One could, however, say that Howard committed the most radical act of self-authorship in her refusal to be cowed and her insistence on forcing through an annulment of her first marriage: she became, effectively, the first woman in England to successfully sue for her own divorce; to meet her second husband at the altar, her hair down, outfacing the gossips as she re-inscribed herself as a virgin.

Knox had her emails to friends back in Seattle and her prison diary. Years after the original trial, her memoir was a long-form attempt at setting the record straight from her perspective, and its title (*Waiting to Be Heard*) suggests she intended it in part at least as a riposte to all the voices that had drowned out her own for so long. After a series of TV interviews promoting the book and protesting her innocence, in which she appeared glossily perfect for the cameras and the glamorous presenters questioning her, Knox retreated into a subdued, monochrome website, the banner image a picture of her with her hair tied in a homely bun, no make-up, her eyes averted from the camera, though this time not inadvertently in *femme fatale* mode (see pp. 50–3), but in an impression (or honest portrayal?) of candid spontaneity and modesty.[2]

Like Knox, each of the women I have studied was caught in the crossfire of intense public attention, forced to make choices about the face, or faces, she presented. Confronted by an always overwhelming and often bewilderingly contradictory set of other selves, the task of presenting an 'authentic' self (or, at least, a credibly consistent one) proved to be a challenge none of them could meet. As I have already noted (see pp. 60–2), all of Knox's courtroom appearances were minutely scrutinised, and it was at such moments that the dilemma for Knox of being/playing 'herself' versus the performance and interpretation of *personae* was presumably felt most acutely. As Rojek argues, drawing on George Herbert Mead's 'split between the *I* (the "veridical" self) and the *Me* (the self as seen by others)', 'The public presentation of self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a "front" or "face" to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve.' Rojek concludes: 'For the celebrity, the split between the I and the Me is often disturbing' (2001, p. 11). There is certainly a sense in a number of Knox's diary entries of a dislocation from reality, and this is one possible explanation for some of her bizarre behaviour in court (smiling; laughing and singing to herself). The same dizzying sense of alienation seems to have afflicted Snyder, too: 'giggling like a schoolgirl' as she waited in the holding pen, one of her lawyers lost his temper and spoke in sharp rebuke: 'Stop that laughing! You are about to be sentenced to death' (MacKellar 2006, pp. 242–3).

No matter what she might think looking back, Knox was in fact a perfect candidate for the role of *femme fatale*. The combination of her photogenic quality and the notion of her capacity for violence, set in the context of an assault on another young woman (an attack with clear sexual elements) rendered the opportunity to invoke the *femme fatale* meme irresistible to many reporters and editors. Regardless of her guilt

or innocence, such representations, and potential misrepresentations, really matter, just as they mattered for Frances Howard, Madeleine Smith and Ruth Snyder. 'Psychical formations, like the fantasy of woman as whore, can be demonstrated', Morrissey argues, 'to exist in dialogue with the sociohistorical realm and to have real, material effects' (2003, p. 9). Some of those effects, in real lives, in the mediated world of the news, in the afterlife of the intertexts, have been the focus of my attention in the course of this study.

In her interview with Diane Sawyer on 30 April 2013, Knox refers to her departure for Europe as embarking on 'an adventure of selfhood' (YouTube 2013). Four years in prison while she was the object of such unusually intense media scrutiny clearly took its toll on Knox's own sense of self. A closer look at the discourse she deploys indicates a preoccupation, even an obsession, with the 'real' Amanda Knox on her part too. Her protestation 'This isn't a case about ... about a character; this isn't a case about a *femme fatale*' (ITV 2013) is just one indication of her sense of bewilderment as she stares at the broken mirror of her identity. In her final speech to the court just before the verdict was announced in the first trial, Knox insisted that her 'conscience was clean' and that she was afraid of 'having the mask of a killer forced onto my skin' (*MOL* 3 December 2009 1:11 PM). *Waiting to Be Heard* offers many such moments when Knox puzzles over a sense of a coherent self. At times, she seems overwhelmed by the barrage of data: 'The screen was flooded with my image. I felt as though I were looking at someone else' (Knox 2013a, p. 206). The images of the kiss on the driveway in particular are seen in detached terms: 'What I saw then – and see now – is a young girl and guy in shock.' Perhaps insensitively given the context of the crime, she writes of feeling 'violated', and says she now understands the belief in some cultures that 'having your picture taken robs you of your soul' (p. 206).

Seen once, the picture taken of Ruth Snyder as she shook in the electric chair is an image that is not easily erased from one's mind. While the reach of Snyder's legacy extends much further in terms of her status as the prototypical lethal woman, what endures is the spectacle of her execution: the *femme fatale* on display, contained and punished. Our fantasy figures in the fictive realm can sometimes be allowed to play free: Catherine Tramell survived to appear in a wretched sequel, *Basic Instinct 2: Risk Addiction* (2006), where Sharon Stone would go through the motions of a camp recreation of an already hyper-stylised version of the *femme fatale*. However, in the real world, one way or another, the power of the *femme fatale* needs to be neutralised. While Frances

Howard escaped execution, the cancer that killed her was interpreted as retributive. In the case of Amanda Knox, it is more complex, and time and the Italian courts – the two are good friends – will tell how history will judge her. During her incarceration, she once shocked the journalists by appearing in court for a slander hearing with a boyishly short haircut, described as a 'gesture of rebellion', which some immediately dubbed a 'Joan of Arc bob' (*MOL* 15 July 2010 5:44 PM). When acquitted and released from prison in October 2011, the *Mail* predicted she would become 'a professional martyr to injustice' (*MOL* 5 October 2011 3:01 PM). And as the guilty version was reinstated in January 2014, she vowed to 'campaign for the wrongfully convicted and to publicise the risk of aggressive interrogation leading to false confession' (*Guardian* 31 January 2014).

The judges' justification of their decision to keep Knox in custody until her trial was underpinned by a claim that she had '*una multiforme personalità*' – a multifaceted personality, 'composed of both self-possession and cunning [...] and a heightened – one might say fatal – capacity for manipulation' (cited in Bachrach 2008). One can almost hear the echo of Dr Lamott's horrified tone as he offers his diagnosis of Catherine Tramell's 'devious, diabolical mind'. Certainly the way Knox has appeared to the watching world suggests multiple personalities, but the extent to which they map onto her 'authentic' identity is debatable. Indeed, it is not only debatable, but could be said to be endlessly contestable: if the postmodernists are correct in their rejection of the notion of a stable, essential self, it seems particularly pertinent to Amanda Knox. Confronted by a blur of newsprint from which a litany of names leap out at her – Foxy Knoxy, Amanda the Ripper, a witch, a she-devil, Amelie or Jessica Rabbit – one might say, no one knows better than she does the sense of a self in flux.

While these women I have studied may have, themselves, found it impossible to get a fix on their identities amidst the white noise, their watching worlds have had no such difficulties. Humanity has always made sense of the world via story-telling, from the earliest oral traditions to contemporary news, where the instinct with 'human interest' reports is to construct them as precisely that: *stories*. In the process, an apparently random series of events can metamorphose into a narrative with a meaning, populated by recognisable types (the alluring female killer, the innocent victim, the male dupe). We rage for order and meaning. In the representation of Amanda Knox one can discern an attempt by contemporary culture to reconcile conflicting reactions of disgust at the idea of a young, attractive woman involved in the brutal murder of another

beautiful woman on the one hand, with a lurid sense of titillation in the face of her supposed sexual depravity on the other.

For Knox, the adventure of selfhood that she began as she left for Europe in the Summer of 2007 became something vastly different from anything she could have imagined. In the wake of the four years she spent in Italy, it seems to have become an impossible quest, a search for a coherent self in a hall of shattered mirrors. In the newspaper reports and pictures, in documentaries and dramatisations, and especially in the open play-space of the internet, the Amanda Knox 'raw material' was, and continues to be, picked up and moulded into a dizzying array of different forms and configurations: ever more versions of Amanda are let loose in the discourse and the imaginations of the communities that continue to puzzle over the detail of the case, or simply in the news media that we all consume.

'Gender is *always* in contest', suggests Laura Gowing. 'Gender relations seem to be continually renegotiated around certain familiar points' (1996, p. 28). This study has explored a place where that contestation has historically been particularly fearsome: the collision point between sexuality and female violence. The ideological pressures on Howard, Snyder and Knox in each case shaped them to fit their own era's version of the *femme fatale*. Frances Howard was at the centre of court gossip from the age of 15, and subject to any number of misogynist reconfigurations of her character, her behaviour, and the events that determined her life and death. In subsequent years, she was 'monstered' by a number of agendas, fashioned as a warning[3] of the corrupting influence of the court and of Royalism as England descended into civil war. Ruth Snyder was a monster of the jazz age – a sexually autonomous woman rejecting the role of wife and mother, a transgressor leading a virtuous man astray; a prototype of the lethal woman soon to dominate the *noir* genre. In the case of Meredith Kercher, the senseless murder of a young woman becomes another warning, a moral tale of the consequences of a toxic mix of promiscuity and alcohol and substance abuse, but Knox is always at the heart of it. My survey of the coverage of the murder of Meredith Kercher and its aftermath suggests that Knox was swiftly encoded in quite specific ways that relate very powerfully to the *femme fatale* meme. The process may have been sparked by the rhetoric of prosecutors and lawyers, but it was rapidly taken up and circulated by the media, particularly in the Italian and the UK tabloid press, and then by a network of discursive forces active on the World Wide Web. It may be that this has had little or no bearing on the conviction and subsequent acquittal of Knox and her co-accused. Nevertheless, it is significant and

troubling that such stereotypes continue to circulate, and continue to be drawn upon so readily in the construction of women on trial for murder.

A preoccupation with the lethal woman has persisted through hundreds of years of Western culture, and raises vital questions about the representation and the treatment of such women in 'real life' – journalism, psychology, legal theory and practice – and in cultural representations, too: that is to say, in the stories a society tells itself to make ideological sense of the world in general, and of relations between men and women in particular. Guilty or innocent, women such as Frances Howard, Madeleine Smith, Ruth Snyder and Amanda Knox become lightning conductors, living embodiments of patriarchy's enduring myth of the *femme fatale*, and of the abiding fear and fascination with female beauty concealing indelible evil.

Notes

Introduction

1. Knox herself disputes this: see Knox 2013a, p. 35.
2. Guede's sentence was reduced to 16 years on appeal in December 2009; such a decision is not uncommon in Italy when the accused opts for a 'fast track' process that does not include a full trial.
3. There is some dispute over whether Sharon Stone chose or was required to film the infamous scene without underwear (see Simkin 2013, pp. 15–17).
4. Belle Gunness (born 1859, date of death uncertain) was responsible for at least a dozen murders, and possibly 30 or 40. She is thought to have killed some or all of her children, husbands, suitors and others. For more on Wiggington and Wuornos, see below.
5. British serial killer Rose West was convicted of ten sex-related murders in 1995, carried out in collaboration with her husband Fred West.
6. Aileen Wuornos was convicted of killing six men between 1989 and 1990 while working as a prostitute in Florida. She was executed in 2002 after spending ten years on Death Row.
7. See Nick Broomfield's engrossing but deeply upsetting documentaries *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1993) and *Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003), which raise disturbing questions about executing the insane.
8. The term is Stephen Greenblatt's: see his ground-breaking new historicist text *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988).
9. *Amy Fisher: My Story* (aka *Lethal Lolita*) (1992), *Casualties in Love: The Long Island Lolita Story* and *The Amy Fisher Story* (both 1993).
10. The character of Ivy was selected as number six in a chart of 'Lethal Ladies: 26 Best Big-Screen Bad Girls' by *Entertainment Weekly* in 2008 (available at: http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,20194359,00.html#1041227, accessed 5 January 2014). For further discussion of Barrymore's star persona, see Williams (2007).
11. Dominguez's book is a definitive account of the case and the media coverage. Fisher has published two autobiographical volumes, *My Story* (1993) and *If I Knew Then . . .* (2004). Since around 2009, she has exploited her notoriety via a career as a porn star.

1 Defining the *Femme Fatale*

1. MacGowan 2007, p. 152.
2. For more detailed discussion of Lilith's place in Jewish scriptures and other religious writings, see Hurwitz (2009).
3. The Royal Shakespeare Company production was directed by Trevor Nunn and starred Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. It was first staged at The Other Place in Stratford in 1976 and subsequently adapted for television and

broadcast in 1979. The scene in question can at the time of writing be accessed via YouTube (available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe5uRWnzUig), accessed on 30 July 2014.

4. See Dijkstra 1988, especially chapters 8 and 10.
5. David Lean's film *Madeleine* (1950) is a straightforward account of the affair, although it takes the unusual step of refusing to commit on the matter of Madeleine Smith's guilt or innocence – compare the approach the TV movie *Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy* adopts (see p. 179). Other films loosely based on the case include *Letty Linton* (1932) and *Dishonored Lady* (1947). Winifred Duke's *Madeleine Smith: A Tragi-Comedy in Two Acts* (1928) is a feeble drama that attempts to dramatise the night L'Angelier's death is discovered in the first act, and the immediate aftermath of the trial in the second. It relies on long, clunky soliloquies from Madeleine and broad stereotypes for her tyrannical father and ineffectual mother. Smith appears self-centred, scornful and manipulative, noting at one point her own 'pretty ankles' and remarking: 'The jury had an excellent view of them. I took good care of that' (Duke 1928, p. 46).
6. Stories of what happened to Madeleine following the trial are disputed. What is not in doubt is that she could no longer remain in Scotland without leaving a permanent blight on her family, and she moved to London with her younger brother. There she met and in 1861 married George Wardle, an artist who worked as the manager of Morris & Co., and who was well acquainted with the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, including William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. Later, she was to become involved in the Socialist movement, and she met George Bernard Shaw through that association. The marriage to Wardle lasted 28 years, before Wardle moved away, alone, to Italy. What put an end to their marriage is not known. He died in 1910, and after that, Madeleine's story is much harder to trace. She may have remarried and moved to America. Some believe that a woman named Lena Sheehy, who died in 1928, may have been Madeleine, but certainty about her final years is as difficult to pin down as the extent of her involvement in Emile's death.
7. The correspondence, which is housed in the National Library of Scotland, was voluminous, though one-sided: Smith had destroyed all the letters sent to her by L'Angelier for fear of discovery, but he had kept almost all the letters she had written.
8. This is not an uncommon phenomenon, with both male and female convicted killers. Chris Rojek notes that 'the serial killers Ian Brady, Myra Hindley, Rosemary West, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Harold Shipman and Timothy McVeigh were all deluged with fan mail while in prison', and that McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, had received 'four proposals of marriage' (2001, p. 15). In a bizarre instance, Rose West became engaged to Dave Glover of the rock band Slade in 2003. Their plans to wed were cancelled almost as soon as they were announced, and shortly afterwards Glover was fired from the band.
9. Other major accounts of Smith's life include Hunt 1965 (first published 1950), and two revisionist studies by MacGowan and Campbell (both 2007).
10. Karla Homolka participated in the rape and murder of Karla's sister, Tammy, and two Ontario schoolgirls, crimes for which her husband Paul Bernardo

was convicted in 1995; Tracie Andrews murdered her partner Lee Harvey in 1996 and attempted to blame his death on a road rage attack; on Rose West, see pp. 8, 200n5.

2 Frances Howard (1590–1632)

1. Frances Howard went through a number of name and title changes: from Mistress Frances Howard, to Lady Frances Howard, to the Countess of Essex, to the Countess of Somerset. Although my preference has been to refer to the women studied in this book by their surnames, for the sake of convenience and to avoid confusion, I will generally refer to Frances Howard as Frances throughout.
2. Sanderson cites Arthur Wilson in corroboration (in Scott 1811, p. 240n).
3. Lindley's feminist-inflected reassessment of the case, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James*, is a study to which my own work in this chapter, and in the book more generally, is indebted, and this idea of 'back-formation' is a particularly important one.
4. Many of these texts are referenced via Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus's invaluable sourcebook *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640* (1985). The term 'H&M' refers from this point on.
5. They base their conclusion chiefly on the evidence of Constantia Munda's level of education, which very few women would have had access to – see Shepherd 1985, p. 126 and Roberts 1998, pp. 45–6.
6. See Lancashire (1983).
7. For further discussion, see Bruzzi (1998).
8. Jeanne Addison Roberts (1998) also argues that Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry* (?1602–12) probably contains references to Frances Howard. She believes that the printing of *Mariam*, *The Insatiate Countess* and *The White Devil* in 1613 was inspired by the Howard affair (Roberts 2002, p. 208).
9. Note that Anne Somerset ascribes this quotation to Edward Sherburn (1997, p. 388).
10. The play also incorporates a subplot, a standard narrative of an old husband (Alibius), a young, beautiful wife (Isabella), and a suitor (Antonio), the latter disguising himself as a madman to gain access to Isabella at the asylum run by Alibius.
11. Most famously, Shakespeare uses it in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, but Marliss C. Desens claims that at least 44 extant plays from the period include examples of the bed-trick (1994, p. 11).
12. See Bromham 1980; Lancashire 1983; for a dissenting view, see Brooke (ed.) 1990, pp. 65–6.

3 Ruth Snyder (1891–1928)

1. A sash weight is a length of lead, weighing anything from 7 to 24 pounds, which counter-balances the sliding sash in a sash window when it is open.

2. It is possible that the jurors' apparent reluctance gave Snyder some false hope: on 8 May, the day before the verdicts were announced, she was reported by the *New York Times* as being of the opinion that 'no jury would be willing to send a woman to the electric chair' (*NYT* 8 May 1927, p. 3).
3. This is another familiar feature of such trials, and is a significant factor in both the Smith case and the Knox case although it should also be noted that this is not a phenomenon specific to female killers: a number of infamous male killers have attracted similar attention. See p. 201 endnote 8.
4. Gray in his testimony placed an emphasis on Snyder's active role in the relationship: 'She called me considerable and wrote to me very often. I will say, to use the slang, she played me pretty hard for awhile [*sic*]' (Court of Appeals 1927, p. 1430).
5. As indeed *Basic Instinct*'s *femme fatale*, Catherine Tramell does, stripping naked and dressing again while fully aware that the detective Nick Curran is watching her in a conveniently angled mirror.
6. Judd Gray's testimony included his appraisal of Ruth Snyder as 'a woman of great charm – I probably don't have to tell you that ... ' (Court of Appeals 1927, p. 1428).
7. As noted above (p. 94), the pieces were apparently ghost-written by journalist Jack Lait, based on interviews Lait had conducted with Snyder before sentencing.
8. The screenplay takes a number of pot-shots at the tabloids in the course of the film. When the editor demands why the *Graphic* cannot get a press pass for the execution, his city pages editor MacLean (Ralph Bellamy) tells him that the Warden believes that it is 'not an ethical paper and doesn't belong'.
9. The murderer, Adolph Hotelling, was caught two days later and almost lynched.
10. 'While she hypnotized my mind with her eyes she would gain control over my body by slapping my cheeks with the palms of her hands', he testified (*NYDN* 1 April 1927, p. 3).
11. I will from this point on refer to the character by her name, while acknowledging the anonymising emphasis of Treadwell's nomenclature.

4 Amanda Knox

1. From TV interview – see ITV 2013. See also pp. 145–6.
2. Girlanda's book caused a degree of embarrassment on its publication. In it, the Italian senator recounted his many visits to Knox in prison, including rather discomfiting accounts of his dreams of Knox (travelling with her in a taxi, Knox giving him her pink iPod), his feelings when they embrace ('A hug: an unexpected request. My face turns red. [...] A wordless hug that seems interminable'), and even the promise he made that they would go camping together and eat truffles when she is released. See *MOL* 20 October 2010 6:42PM.
3. The case has also inspired a number of writers to publish defences of Knox, some indulging in amateur sleuthing and others drawing on expertise in

aspects of criminal law and investigation. See, for example, Fisher (2011), Waterbury (2011) and Preston (2013).

4. The *Mail* also claims to be the second largest-selling daily print newspaper in the UK, with the *Mail on Sunday* in the same position among the Sunday papers. An Ipsos Mori poll taken just a couple of years before Meredith Kercher's death shows a fairly distinctive pattern of demographics for the *Mail*: over 61% of its readers were over the age of 45; only 9% were younger than 24 (the survey's youngest measured age group is 15–24), giving it the lowest circulation among young people other than the *Daily Telegraph* (7%), far behind the *Daily Star* and the *Sun* (28 and 15% respectively) (Duffy and Rowden 2005, p. 20). The same research indicates that *Mail* readers are significantly more concerned with crime than readers of other papers (25% of *Mail* readers saw it as 'the most important issue facing Britain', putting them several points above the national average of 22%) (Duffy and Rowden 2005, p. 15). In terms of gender, there is a slight preponderance of female readers – 53% (p. 20) – and 59% of readers are from the white collar social classes (AB, C1), with 21% from C2 and 19% categorised as DE (the lowest socio-economic classes). As a point of reference, this compares to 84% (AB, C1) for the *Guardian*, 83% for *The Times* and 82% for the *Telegraph* (p. 21).
5. This was subsequently widely shared via news agencies (see *MOL* 16 October 2013 8:30 AM and Reuters UK 2013).
6. Corroborated by Knox in her memoir, though she says it happened when she was 13 (Knox 2013a, p. 206).
7. In her email to the court in December 2013, sent because she had elected not to attend the trial and risk re-arrest were she to be convicted, Knox gives a list of how she had been described since the trials began: 'Conniving; manipulating; man-eater; narcissist; enchantress; duplicitous; adulterer; drug addict; an explosive mix of drugs, sex and alcohol; dirty; witch; murderer; slanderer; demon; depraved; imposter; promiscuous; succubus; evil; dead inside; pervert; dissolute; psychopath; a wolf in sheep's clothing; rapist; thief; reeking of sex; Judas; she-devil; Luciferina . . . ' (Knox 2013b, p. 4).
8. I am indebted to an exchange of posts on the PMF message board for discussion of this point, notably from Jester and Tiziano (available at: http://perugiamurderfile.org/viewtopic.php?f=1&p=22044, accessed 5 January 2012).
9. Search conducted 10 October 2013.
10. One representative example has the *Mail* captioning the image 'Strange behaviour: Amanda and boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito were seen kissing outside the crime scene' (*MOL* 9 December 2009 9:55 AM). Text later in the article refers to her 'canoodling with Sollecito outside the scene of the crime', mentions the cartwheel and the splits, and segues straight into a lengthy discussion of the vibrator kept in her transparent toiletry bag – see p. 168.
11. In the early days of the investigation, Sollecito's team seemed to test a strategy of separating him from Knox, before they calculated that a united front would represent a stronger defence. However, for at least a week, Team Sollecito worked hard to create the impression that he had been drawn in by Knox.

12. This position was reiterated when Sollecito lawyer Giulia Bongiorno made her closing remarks during the 2013–14 appeal: 'Raffaele was not a puppy. He wouldn't have killed for the love of Amanda' (Reuters 2014).
13. Knox herself corroborates this version (Knox 2013a, p. 109).
14. Forensic tests on a knife taken by police officers from Sollecito's kitchen found traces of Knox's DNA on the handle and of Kercher's DNA on the blade, although the traces were very small, and the evidence has been disputed in the appeals. Other forensic evidence includes traces of blood in the bathroom which contained mixed DNA from Knox and Kercher. The Hellman-Zanetti report on the acquittal of Knox and Sollecito in 2011 claims the bathroom blood samples were unreliable because of the way they had been collected by forensic officers. An English translation of the report is available at: http://hellmannreport.wordpress.com/contents/, accessed 30 January 2014.
15. For further discussion, see Simkin 2006, pp. 34–8.
16. See her account of the questioning in Knox 2013a, pp. 109–23. Her version is disputed; in particular, her claim that she was struck around the head by police officers was denied by the authorities and became the subject of a slander case.
17. The *News of the World* was shut down in July 2011 in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal.
18. The role of the high-profile prosecutor Giuliano Mignini is not insignificant: he was noted for his preoccupation with the so-called Monster of Florence case (16 murders committed between 1968 and 1985) and was accused of ordering illegal wiretapping of individuals involved in that investigation; this came back to haunt him during the Knox-Sollecito trial when he was found guilty of having exceeded the powers of his office in January 2010. The image of a prosecutor convicted of a crime and yet still in post (his conviction was overturned in November 2011) fed unjust stereotypes of Italian corruption.
19. The quotation comes from the documentary *Blonde Poison*, included on various DVD editions of the film including the US Unrated Collector's Edition (2001), US Special Edition (2003), US Ultimate Edition (Unrated Director's Cut) (2006) and the UK 10th Anniversary Special Edition (2002).
20. Sollecito and Knox blamed their haziness about their whereabouts on the night of the murder on the pot they smoked, and Rudy Guede claimed at his trial that the effects on his digestive system of a kebab he had eaten that evening prompted him to interrupt consensual sexual activity with Meredith Kercher.
21. Knox's lawyers eventually threatened to sue Lifetime for invasion of her privacy (*MOL* 6 February 2011 9:13AM).
22. Sidney's cousin is revealed as the killer: the motive is Jill's jealousy of all the attention the Woodbury murders have brought her, as Sidney visits her hometown on a tour promoting a book about her experiences.
23. For an entirely different take on the case (which, unusually, manages to avoid the compulsion to focus on Knox), it is worth seeking out another intriguing intertext, the imaginative reconstruction 'Truth Will Out (Ballad of Melissa and Remy)' on Chuck Prophet's album *Night Surfer* (Yep Roc, 2014) (song written by Prophet/klipschutz).

Conclusion

1. As Cixous writes, ‘We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty’ (1975, p. 885).
2. Available at: www.amandaknox.com, accessed 13 January 2014.
3. The term ‘monster’ has its roots in the Latin *monstrum*, an omen – from *monere*, to warn. See discussion in Asma (2009), pp. 13–14.

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A note on references

The demands of a referencing system for a book that spans the centuries and cites different kinds of media are complex. Newspaper references have been placed in a discrete section. Where a newspaper (such as the *New York Daily News* or the *Daily Mail*) is referenced repeatedly, it is given a separate heading. Occasionally, an article published in a newspaper or on its equivalent website is included in the main section of references: this is usually reserved for Op-Ed opinion pieces, book reviews, etc.

Dates are given in the UK form: i.e. day/month/year. The *MailOnLine* (*Daily Mail*) articles are also time-stamped for ease of reference (since at times two or three bulletins were published on the same day). The *Mail*'s system switched from the 12-hour to the 24-hour clock during the period covered (2007–13). I have standardized all times to 12-hour clock with AM or PM added. Finally, in the case of the *New York Daily News*, several editions were published on the same day: a suffix of 'P' indicates the so-called 'Pink' (early) edition, and the suffix 'F' is indicative of 'Final edition'. Additional letters 'a', 'b', etc. indicate references to different articles in the same edition.

All references to the Bible are to the King James Version.

Finally, a list of play texts is given for those plays where editions vary (for the most part, drama from the seventeenth century). Where the plays are quoted in the book, the citations refer to the edition in this list. Some spellings have been modernised.

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