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On the evening of 2 February 1774, a small, injured body was discovered in the ‘necessary’ at the home of Paul Cauldwell, a soap-maker of Cow Cross, East London.¹ A carpenter was called, who released a new-born boy from the vault. The baby, whose cries had been heard by the servants, had been dropped in the privy and pushed down with a stick, sustaining a half-inch wound in his belly. Astonishingly, he was still alive. Cauldwell’s servants tended him until the surgeon arrived, but the efforts to repair his damaged body were in vain, and, in the early hours of the following morning, the child died. His mother, a spinster named Jane Cornforth who was a maid in the Cauldwell household, was arrested, and held in prison until her trial at the Old Bailey on 21 May 1774.² She was found guilty of wilful murder, sentenced to death, and executed a few days later. During the procession to Tyburn, a runaway bullock from Smithfield stormed into the crowd, ‘tossing several persons who were much hurt’ – an act of random violence that formed the backdrop to Jane Cornforth’s sorry end.³

From court records and press reports, a little can be gleaned of Jane Cornforth and the events that led her to the scaffold. Character witnesses at the trial attested that she was ‘a tender, humane girl’, who was ‘kind to children’. She had recently purchased new linen, evidence that she was preparing for the birth, facing up to the consequences of her pregnancy. Her employment record – less than a month with Cauldwell – suggests that the shame of her condition had been the cause of her dismissal from her previous employer, Margaret Jarvis, who nevertheless testified to her good character at the trial. Perhaps Cauldwell had not spotted that Cornforth was in the late stages of pregnancy when he took her on. His servants were not so blind: they had no trouble in identifying the source of the miserable deposit in the privy – the new servant girl, who ‘in cleaning the grate, could not get up without laying hold of something to help her up’.⁴

Like all such documents, however, the existing records tell only part of the story, leaving much to our speculation. There is nothing, for instance, about

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the identity of the father, or the circumstances of the child's conception. Should we assume that the father was a member of Jarvis's household, another servant, or perhaps even a family member – Jarvis's husband, or son? Had Jane Cornforth been seduced, or raped? Had she fallen in love? Cauldwell claimed in the trial that he had told her that he 'would have put [her] into the hospital to lie-in if [she] had acquainted [him] of this matter; all the answer she made . . . was, what could she do?'⁵

Why had Cornforth – by everyone's account a 'tender, humane girl' – perpetrated such a violent deed? Had she acted in cold blood, or through temporary insanity (she claims herself that she was 'out of her senses')?⁶ If the latter, was this provoked by the physical trauma of giving birth, or was it a regrettable, yet intelligible, response to the social stigma and destitution that were the likely consequences of an illegitimate birth? In court and in the newspapers, none of these questions are raised, and given the absence of diaries or correspondence, we can only imagine what might have happened, and how Jane Cornforth might have felt. Amid the hustle and the bustle on the discovery of the child, the calling of servants, surgeons, carpenters, and constables, and the shock that each one registers on seeing the terrible injuries of the newborn baby, there is no probing of Cornforth's motives, or the circumstances that might have provoked this act. For today's reader there is something chilling about the apparent ease with which the violent death of the infant bastard seems to be accommodated in the run of everyday events. Our gaze jolts back and forth between the wounded corpse of the infant, and the pathetic culprit named in the reiterated refrain: 'poor Jane Cornforth, who loved children'.⁷

Despite the silences in the records, social historians have used cases such as Jane Cornforth's as source material from which to piece together an understanding of child murder, and the society in which it was committed.⁸ Unmarried women, like Cornforth, who would have been subject to the harsh social pressures exerted on illegitimate mothers, committed the overwhelming majority of crimes that came to trial. Extra-marital pregnancies often led a woman to the loss of regular employment, homelessness, being disowned by family and friends, and being cast out of parishes that were unwilling to pay poor relief for illegitimate children.⁹ Documentary evidence of child murder cases available from legal depositions, court records, newspaper accounts, and medical records, has allowed the reconstruction of scenarios of illegitimate birth and death, extending knowledge of the lives of single women, their position in the community, and their treatment under the law. We know, therefore, that the discovery of an infant corpse in the privy, or concealed elsewhere – in a box in a servant's bedroom, or

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thrown into a river – was not a daily event by any means, but neither was it uncommon through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ We know, too, that the mothers of these unfortunate infants were likely to be servants like Cornforth, women whose domestic situation made them vulnerable to illegitimate pregnancy, but ill-placed to raise children.¹¹ We also know, however, that it was usually difficult, if not impossible, to establish whether the child in such cases had been stillborn, had died of natural causes, or was the victim of a violent crime. The very high level of infant mortality shrouded many such cases in uncertainty. So, too, did the shame which was generated by illegitimate pregnancies, as women were often compelled to give birth alone and in secret. The usual defence of a woman accused of killing a newborn was that it had died of natural causes; indeed Jane Cornforth claimed that she thought her baby had been stillborn, although in her case, the cries of the child abandoned to the privy make this difficult to believe. In many cases, however, the cause of death was genuinely uncertain; sometimes, one must presume, even to the parturient mother herself, whose desires and intents in such traumatic circumstances are likely to have been deeply confused.

The level of uncertainty surrounding these crimes presents a particular challenge in the reconstruction of child murders. Even though historians have used the documentary evidence effectively to imagine the events at and around the scene of the crime by using a kind of probabilistic calculus, such endeavours often overlook the extent to which the exact nature of the events was always obscured to contemporary commentators.¹² The law under which most suspicious deaths of new-born infants were dealt with had been set up precisely in recognition of the difficulty of establishing the facts, and did not require positive proof of murder in the way that later courts would require. The 1624 ‘Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children’ (21 Jac. I c. 27) directed attention not to the death of the child, but to whether or not the mother had concealed the death.¹³ Under this statute, concealment of the death of an infant bastard established the legal presumption that the mother was guilty of murder, whether or not she could be shown to have caused the death, and reflected the common supposition that the shame of illegitimacy was motive enough to provoke a woman to commit the deed. The law was interpreted differently at various times, but towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Cornforth was tried, the concealment of a pregnancy had come to be taken as evidence of an intention to murder the child. A standard vindication of women facing such charges was, therefore, that they had prepared for the birth, the evidence of which being the purchase of linen. Hence the

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significance of the claim in Cornforth's defence that she had done just this. The concealment charge also came to mean that, unlike in the treatment of most other crimes, the burden of proof lay on the suspect to establish her innocence, rather than on the prosecution to prove her guilt.¹⁴ The paradoxical but not uncommon result was an unusually severe law, but one under which courts were reluctant to convict. According to Jackson, in the Northern Circuit courts, for example, in the period between 1720 and 1800, only six of nearly two hundred indicted women were found guilty of the crime, and of those, only two were executed.¹⁵ Cornforth's case is unusual in that she was found guilty of murder – but in her case the evidence of live birth was incontrovertible.

The 1624 statute was remarkably long-lived. It was not used in all cases of women convicted of murdering their children – there is no direct mention of the statute, for instance, in Cornforth's trial. As Jackson has shown, however, it dominated the legal discussion of the crime and shaped the kinds of evidence that were presented and verdicts that were reached until the end of the eighteenth century, and arguably beyond. By the time that Cornforth was convicted it was already 150 years old, and despite efforts by reformers, especially in the 1770s, it was not repealed until 1803. Indeed, it was partly the contentious and ambiguous nature of such cases that stood in the way of reform. Nevertheless, by the late eighteenth century the law was widely held to be anachronistic, out of synch with the mores of a changing society: it was considered inefficient by some, on account of the courts' reluctance to convict under it, and inhumane by others, in the harsh treatment of unmarried women it was empowered to mete out.¹⁶

A series of reforms in the nineteenth century changed the legal definition of the crime and its social ramifications. A new statute enacted in 1803 (43 Geo. III c. 58) put the murder of infant bastards on the same footing as other murders. The burden of proof now fell on the Crown rather than the defendant, and a lesser charge of concealment was created which carried a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment, and which could be invoked in cases where there was insufficient evidence of murder.¹⁷ In 1828, the Offences Against Person Act (9 Geo. IV c. 31) extended the charge of concealment to married women, thus ending the legal association of the crime with illegitimacy. A change in the law in 1861, the Offences Against Person Act (24/25 Vic. c. 100), made concealment into a separate, substantive crime, which applied to any person, not just the mother.¹⁸

Despite these changes, consistent notes can be traced in the commentary on the law regarding child murder throughout both centuries. In particular there continues to be a division between, on the one hand, those who

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saw child murder as a crime committed by sexually deviant, unmarried women, and, on the other hand, those who held it to be a crime provoked by archaic or corrupt institutions, which themselves required reform. By association, people often deemed the crime itself to be a throwback to an earlier state of society, a scratch on the civilised veneer of modern life. The 1624 statute had shaped the ways in which child murder was perceived, as a crime of convenience or necessity committed by unwed mothers, but opinion divided as to whether its ultimate cause was the sexual disorder of unmarried women, or alternatively, the ignominy of illegitimacy, and a failure of sympathy on the part of institutions. The events of child murder were notoriously murky, and they always provoked highly differentiated and deeply contested explanations.

This strong element of doubt and confusion pervades many aspects of the crime and its treatment under the law. For contemporary onlookers, these awful events did not easily, if at all, yield their secrets. At a certain level, the high rate of acquittal is indicative of this. This was not always or only an effect of the courts' sympathy for the plight of unmarried women – part of the more general trend in the eighteenth century in which affective relations within the family, especially between mothers and children, enjoyed heightened significance.¹⁹ It was also an expression of the difficulty of making convictions on the basis of partial and inconclusive evidence, an admission of the inability to know the truth.²⁰ Indeed, we can often detect a sense in which contemporary society did not *want* to know the truths of these horrible crimes. Legal and other discussions of child murder in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries register a strong sense of ambivalence: a fascination with, and horror of, its violence, but at the same time a seemingly sympathetic tolerance towards it, a willingness to turn a blind eye. Such ambivalence is witnessed in the newspaper reports of 'poor Jane Cornforth', whose terrible violation of her child is documented at the same time as the pathos of her dismal end. This difficulty of knowing – which constitutes a kind of epistemological shortfall – is registered in many of the representations of child murder prevalent within British culture throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and contributes to its peculiarly complex effects.

Although this study draws on the work of social historians, its aims are somewhat different. My purpose is not to establish what happened – the whens, wheres, and whys. I am interested less in individual cases of murder, like that of poor Cornforth junior, who in any case receded from public purview as quickly and as unceremoniously as he entered it, than in the murder of any child, in the *idea* of child murder as it circulated in society

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and through time, far beyond the scene of the crime. Despite, or possibly because of, the awfulness of the events, child murders left cultural traces across society, vestiges of crime and misfortune that offered ground for anxiety, concern, and reflection. Discussions of child murder frequently seeped into debates on other issues, often providing an example or test case through which society examined its own values and standards of civilised behaviour. Child murder is thus in evidence in a wide array of sources, quite apart from court records and newspaper reports, and, in each case, carries complex and often contradictory meanings. In novels, poems, and plays, in philosophical and polemical works, political and economic tracts, in scientific and medical works, we encounter the unnatural deaths of children of vastly different kinds: violent deaths, deaths from neglect, sacrificial and revengeful deaths, even sympathetic and redemptive deaths. There are babies killed by desperate and destitute mothers, like Jane Cornforth, and their representations in literature – Wordsworth’s Martha Ray, or Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. But there are many other kinds of child murder. For example, babies eaten by greedy gourmets in Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*; babies scoffed by hungry beasts in Mandeville, and later Rousseau; babies murdered by primitive fathers in anthropological works of the eighteenth century; babies of slaves, *saved* through murder from an ignominious life, like the child of the ‘Runaway Slave’ in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem; Indian girls slaughtered at birth by their families, according to ancient custom; English children, ‘positively murdered’ by neglectful and ill-educated mothers, as Mary Wollstonecraft claimed; children forced to starve by cruel Dame Nature in Malthus’s shocking account of the natural restrictions of population; children supposedly massacred by an uncaring government, according to critics of the New Poor Law; babies ‘killed for a burial fee’ by the avaricious poor, according to Tennyson in *Maud*; and children sacrificed by ‘Old Father Time’ in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, ‘because we *are* too menny’.

While the historical record often reveals reluctance on the part of society to confront the full implications of child murder, it is curious that so many texts return repeatedly to scenes of infant killing, to produce a plethora of modes, motives, and meanings of murder. The sheer range of these can be glimpsed when we consider the various child murder plots that were in circulation throughout the period, many of which were inherited from classical and biblical mythology and ancient history: for instance the story of Medea, who killed her children to wreak revenge on Jason; or of Herod, the cruel tyrant whose massacre of the innocents accompanied the birth of Christ; or Brutus, who allowed his sons to be executed under due process of law for

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Figure 1. Jacques Louis David, *Les Licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*, 1789

the sake of the Roman Republic. The last was an episode much admired by Jacobins in France, who were attempting to establish a new republic on the model of Rome. Its most famous visual representation is David's 'The Lictors returning to Brutus the bodies of his sons' (see Fig. 1), produced on the cusp of the Revolution.²¹ Even before 1789, however, within the idiom of civic humanism that was prevalent in the political culture of eighteenth-century England, Brutus's sacrifice is lauded as a model of virtuous behaviour and as a fable illustrating individual sacrifice for a common good.

Each of these stories involving child murder is retold repeatedly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts.²² Taken together they demonstrate that, despite the emphasis in the legal records, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, not all child murderers were imagined to be mothers – men, too, of varying kinds, were also held to kill children – nor all their victims newborns – in Brutus's case the sons are adult men.²³ Moreover, in these imaginative renderings, acts of child killing had diverse and conflicting associations. They could be invoked to dramatise and explain states of insanity such as Medea's, and ideals of civic virtue embodied by Brutus's sacrifice; and political ideas, from Herodian tyranny to Roman republican democracy.

The purpose of this study is to track motifs of child murder as they circulate in British culture across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, accreting layers of meanings that are intricately related to the contexts in which they appear. These motifs take on a life of their own, and are never reducible to a reflection of a particular case, such as Jane Cornforth's, even though their symbolic resonance will often frame the responses to and representations of such deeds. If our own culture is inclined to see child murder as an act devoid of meaning, an expression of nihilism, the earlier period reveals instead that child murder is invested with a bewildering excess of meanings, and it is this that contributes to its particularly potent and unstable character.

As the persistence of plots from classical and biblical mythology indicates, acts of child murder had been a source of imaginative speculation since ancient times. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, they appear as a theme in novel and unlikely contexts, and begin to assume new and complex meanings. In a cluster of texts published in the 1720s, child murder is a topic of discussion in both apologies for, and arguments against, the new commercial society. Whether bemoaned or celebrated, the spirit of commercialism was widely experienced at this time as a profound break with traditional forms of social organisation and discussions of it set the terms for later critiques of capitalism and commodity culture that would dominate discourses about society in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is here, then, in the midst of heated debates about the social and moral consequences of commercialism – the quest for profit, the desire for luxury, the inexorable circulation and consumption of goods – that child murder embarks on a new career as the focus of critiques and celebrations of the new social organisation. As I will show, in highly influential works by Bernard Mandeville and Jonathan Swift, acts such as that which was later committed by Jane Cornforth became, for the first time, a key motif through which both writers contemplate, albeit to very different ends, the new economic conditions of their society.

The heightened emphasis placed on the violation of children in this period may be seen as an aspect of broader social and cultural trends, a paradoxical symptom of the new value that has come to be placed on the child. The period is often characterised as one dominated by new conceptions of the affectionate family, and by sentimental attitudes towards childhood.²⁴ Moreover, modes of family relations tended to be taken at the time as analogues for the condition of society as a whole, so that, for instance, standards of childcare were regarded as gauges of a society's

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civilised values. As a corollary to this, the harm of children is a frequent sign of an antiquated and brutal regime. Some recent commentators have taken this trend at face value: that is to say, that the various changes across the two centuries have been understood as part of a process of modernisation in which society gradually threw off its antiquated, child-murdering ways to become a more child-loving, and hence enlightened society. This view has been articulated most strongly – and controversially – by historian Lloyd De Mause, who in his psycho-historical account characterises the early modern period as a time in which child murder was rife.²⁵ A similar teleology is at work in much of the more measured historical writing about child murder, in which the legislative reforms of the nineteenth century, including the repeal of the 1624 statute in 1803, but also the enactment of various statutes towards the end of the nineteenth century for the protection of children, are viewed in a strongly progressive light.²⁶

A broader array of evidence, I suggest, presents a more complicated and less teleological picture. Indeed, it is precisely because of the new value that is placed on children that accounts of the violation of children carry so much weight. The rhetoric of both Swift and Mandeville, and of subsequent writers, relies for its effect on the existence of sentimental notions of young children. Moreover, a discourse of child sacrifice, in which the murder of a child, or children, in one way or another is valued as a positive or virtuous act, remains in evidence at least until the end of the nineteenth century. In surveying the literature of the period, I have detected no diminution in its usage, and although it is subject to fluctuations, it remains available to writers throughout. More emphatically, even the rhetoric that speaks for the amelioration of infant life is paradoxically entwined with the rhetoric of child sacrifice. This proves efficacious for campaigners for legislation for the protection of infant life at the end of the nineteenth century, who were keen to make distinctions between the relative values of infant lives on proto-eugenic grounds. When we read widely in the literature of the period, rather than encountering a society that is progressively kinder in the attitudes it expresses towards children, less tolerant of infant death or violation, less willing to engage with the rhetoric of child sacrifice, we find, instead, a society that continued to maintain highly complex and ambiguous attitudes to infant death and its symbolic potential.

The discussion of child murder in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is too extensive and complex to lend itself to an exhaustive inventory. In order to gain purchase on it, I have chosen, therefore, to concentrate on clusters of texts in which the interest in child murder appears particularly intense: the discussions of commercial society from the 1720s; anthropological

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debates about the nature of man in the 1770s, which revolve around the spectacle of child murder; debates about social order following the French Revolution in 1798; the explosive responses to the New Poor Law at the end of the 1830s; and the so-called epidemic of child murder in England around 1859. In each of these contexts, child murder emerges as a motif in which debates of a serious nature about key issues in Britain's self-imaginings are conducted.

My emphasis on cultural instantiations of the act leads me to depart from the historical treatment of child murder in two ways. First, I interpret child murder more widely than historians have tended to do, to include not only acts of neo-naticide, but also the violent death of any person who is represented as a child. Second, while most accounts by historians follow a periodisation dictated by legislative reform, and see the repeal of the 1624 statute in 1803 as marking an important break between the treatment of the crime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the point of view of the cultural reverberations of child murder, the break comes not at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but at the very end. Although the notion of child murder would continue, in different forms, to haunt British culture well beyond this date, a cycle of debate whose initial terms were set by Swift and Mandeville in the early eighteenth century draws to a close at the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, child murder came to be embedded in discussions of birth control and overlapping debates about eugenics, both of which exploited the rich rhetorical repertoire of child murder that had accumulated over the previous two centuries. As we shall see, advocates for the new technologies of contraception on the one hand, and evolutionary science on the other, saw child murder as a strategy of adaptation, a force for good in a changing world, and used an inherited narrative of sacrifice and redemption in order to justify this interpretation. These themes converge in the controversial figure of the New Woman. The invention of *fin-de-siècle* culture, the New Woman is a fascinating symptom of the times: Janus-like, she is both a scandalous throw back to primeval states, but also the harbinger of change, and the model for the new, autonomous individual. As we shall see, her modernity is sometimes registered through her association with child murder through both her associations with birth control, and the fact that she refuses maternal roles in her quest for autonomy. Equally, it is associated with her embrace of proto-eugenic theories for the amelioration of social problems, and the strengthening of the empire.

In a short, final chapter I revisit a theme that has run throughout the book, from the discussion of Swift's idea that the Irish are killers of their