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OVERVIEW

Chapter 5 provides:

- An exploration – underpinned by psychosocial and feminist approaches – of mediated responses to very serious offending by women, concentrating mainly on women who kill and rape.
- A consideration of whether women are treated more harshly or more leniently by the courts.
- A discussion of whether women who commit violent crimes in partnership with a man are passive victims or active partners who kill through choice.
- An analysis of the standard stories, stereotypes and stock motifs employed by the media to convey deviant women's 'evilness'.
- A consideration of women's 'otherness' and why women who commit very serious crimes are much more newsworthy than men who similarly offend.

KEY TERMS

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ agency | ■ infanticide |
| ■ deviance | ■ news values |
| ■ difference | ■ otherness |
| ■ familicide/family annihilation | ■ psychoanalysis |
| ■ feminism | ■ psychosocial explanations |
| ■ filicide | ■ spousal homicide |
| ■ heteropatriarchy | ■ unconscious |

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This chapter will consider the public's mediated responses to women who kill and commit other serious offences. As we have already seen, the modern media are highly selective in their constructions of offences, offenders and victims. For a crime to be reported at all, let alone be the subject of the kind of persistent, pervasive coverage which can result in the construction of offenders as folk devils, the prevailing ideological climate must be especially hostile to the offence that has been committed. Something about the juxtaposition of time and place will result in a case standing out as extraordinary or exceptional even in a society where the most horrific of crimes may be presented, if at all, as run-of-the-mill episodes. Often, it is the existence of some kind of mediated representation such as CCTV footage that jolts us out of our cosy stupor and forces us to recognize the reality of serious crime in places we least expect to see it. At the same time, the criminal act, its perpetrator(s) and/or its victim(s) must conform to some of the key journalistic *news values* described in Chapter 2. The synthesis of these two

contexts – ideological climate and journalistic assumptions – are instrumental in creating public consensus and in shaping the process by which some individuals are designated 'others' – monsters in our midst. They also determine why some offences (for example, the part played by Myra Hindley in the murders of five children) cast a much longer shadow than others (for example, the murder of at least 150, and possibly as many as 350, adults by Harold Shipman). Following the line taken by many *feminist* critics, it will be argued in this chapter that the media tap into, and magnify, deep-seated public fears about deviant women, while paying much less attention to equally serious male offenders whose profile does not meet the *psychosocial* criteria of 'otherness'. While many generalized points will be made about women's involvement in certain categories of offending (murder, manslaughter, infanticide and filicide, sexual assault, and rape) specific and, of necessity, selective – though highly newsworthy and notorious – cases will be referred to throughout the chapter as illustrations of media misogyny.

Psychoanalytic perspectives

Contemporary media reflect other socio-political institutions in their attitudes to marriage and the family, which remain curiously embedded in the Victorian age. Notions of the feminine as passive, maternal, married and monogamous co-exist with sentimental ideas about childhood innocence, resulting in any 'other'...

Summary

- This chapter has located psychological and sociological concerns with identity and difference within criminological discourses of responses to crime in an attempt to understand the origins of, and reasons for, the fear and loathing that is directed (arguably disproportionately) at a particular group of deviant 'others' – women who kill and rape.
- The cultural inclination to view women's deviance as a manifestation of their 'otherness' is compounded by its newsworthiness, which is unquestionable, and creates a prevailing ideological climate that tolerates women who deviate from cultural expectations of 'appropriate' feminine behaviour.
- It has been argued that, in common with wider media and cultural constructions, women who kill are subject to intense scrutiny – both in legal and media institutions – regarding their sexual proclivities and history, and are frequently judged on their body size, shape and sexual attractiveness. Paradoxically, conventional constructions of both beauty and ugliness can be used as evidence of a woman's inherent badness, and the media borrow from a range of classical literature and mythology to evoke images of monstrous women. Women who kill (especially those who kill children and young women) are the diabolical antithesis to the myth of the good mother, and much media discourse is constructed around 'essentialist' notions of women; in other words, they presuppose that the 'essence' of women is different from that of men, and that women are biologically predisposed to be caring and nurturing. Women's crimes against children are especially inexplicable and 'unreal'. Unless an offence can be accounted for in terms of a 'sickness' that is compatible with the essential 'nature' of womanhood, it will be regarded as 'unnatural' and evil (Worrall, 1990). A degree of biological essentialism is also evident in the common theme that women who commit serious crimes – especially when they do so in partnership with a man – are the prime movers in these relationships and are, in essence, evil manipulators.
- If a woman's serious offending cannot be explained as 'madness' but appears to be a lucid and rational act, it becomes symbolically disturbing. Women who claim that they acted in an autonomous and calculated manner (as Myra Hindley did) are so transgressive of societal notions of 'proper' (that is, non-agentic) womanhood that the details of their offences are glossed over in legal and media discourses and explanations for their crimes are curiously absent from feminist readings.

- The discussion has demonstrated that psychosocial and feminist perspectives are far from incompatible, drawing on psychoanalytically informed ways of understanding gendered identities. In the cases discussed in this chapter, psychoanalytic concepts have been used in conjunction with sociologically-informed ideas from media studies and cultural studies in order to explore exactly why it is that some individuals generate a level of hysteria and vilification that is arguably disproportionate to their actual offences. In addition, it has been argued that the media have consistently represented the abuse perpetuated on women and children as extraordinary rather than as the worst outcomes of the institutions of marriage and the family which historically have enshrined unequal relations between men, women and children.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Study a range of newspapers and pay close attention to stories involving women offenders.

1. What evidence can you find for the proposition that women are constructed according to their perceived 'otherness'? What kinds of motifs and stereotypes are apparent in your chosen news report?
2. To what extent do Lombrosian ideas about 'born female criminals', whose deviance is indicated by their very physiology, permeate contemporary discourses concerning women and crime?
3. What sorts of women...