

Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture

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On a sweltering August day in 1892, an unremarkable New England spinster hacked her father and stepmother to death with an axe; or so the story goes.¹ The axe precipitated more than these brutal murders, though. The hundred years following the Fall River crime have seen a remarkable body of creative work based on it: two operas, a ballet, numerous novels, eight plays, a film, a television show, two short stories, four poems, various popular songs, and, of course, the children's rhyme, "Lizzie Borden with an axe, Gave her father forty wacks, When she saw what she had done, She gave her mother forty-one."² Is it any wonder that few Americans don't know who Lizzie Borden was and that most of them likely believe the rhyme that convicts her, unaware that the twelve gentlemen of a New Bedford jury found her innocent? Indeed, the persistent attraction of the Borden story is in large measure due to how the fictive Lizzie Borden has been constructed in the twentieth century.

Lizzie Borden's story has tended to take one or the other of two fictional forms: the tragic romance and the feminist quest.³ Gender plays a key role in both forms and both are plotted along such dramatic fault lines of American culture as Calvinism, the outlaw and violence. As the story of Lizzie Borden has been created and re-created through rhyme and fiction it has taken on the qualities of a popular American myth or legend that effectively links the present to the past. Its social meaning is like that of all myths in that it performs a "symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them." Like all myths, the Borden story is told and retold, which means, as

Richard Slotkin has noted, “the range of reference of these stories is being expanded. Each new context in which the story is told adds meaning to it because the telling implies a metaphoric connection between the storied past and the present.”⁴

What is there, then, about the continually re-told tale of Lizzie Borden that resonates with fundamental elements of American culture? Why does it continue to fascinate authors, composers and choreographers? And what is the tale’s appeal, in fact and in fiction, for readers and audiences who consume the cultural products structured around it? Does this sensational murder case in its many fictive manifestations reflect the values, goals and world-view of American culture in the twentieth century? How does it make that “metaphoric connection between the storied past and the present?”

The intriguing question about the Borden case is not “whodunit?”⁵ Lizzie’s guilt or innocence is not at issue either in the fictions nor in this essay. The reader of both must share the ambivalence of the character in Sharon Pollock’s play *Blood Relations* who asks Lizzie, “Did you do it?” but then hastens to add, “If you say yes, I’ll be horrified; if you say no, I’d be disappointed.”⁶ Unlike the equally puzzling case of Jack the Ripper, where the fascination seems to be *who* done it, Lizzie biographers almost without exception agree that she done it. All, though, ask *why* she done it. Motivation becomes the open door through which these many authors step into a particular time and place to infuse characters and events with their own ideas drawn from a lexicon of American culture. In the 1948 ballet *Fall River Legend*, Lizzie’s stepmother thwarted a tender romance with a minister; in the 1967 *Lizzie Borden: An Opera in Three Acts*, the romance is with a sea captain who was her sister’s beau; in novelist Evan Hunter’s 1984 scenario, Lizzie is interrupted in a lesbian tryst with the Irish maid, lashes out at her stepmother with a candlestick, then does away with her father out of fear that he will discover the first murder. The list of why she done it goes on and on. In literary terms, the events, the murders and Lizzie’s subsequent acquittal become an ur-text for the contemplation of motive, of power, of patriarchy, of sexuality, and of love. They become a stage on which the original players—Lizzie, her stepmother Abby, her sister Emma, her father Andrew, their maid Bridget Sullivan and an assortment of lawyers, policemen and neighbors—are continually cast and re-cast by different directors to act out various cultural and political scripts.

Those authors who have commented on their own work support the notion that motivation is central to their conception of the Borden story. Jack Beeson and his librettist Richard Plant wrote in 1985, “the whole story is about *why* she did do it.” In their opera they created a Freudian family romance in which Lizzie’s forbidden fixation on her father is transferred to the equally unattainable suitor of her sister. Their New England Electra was to be a “distillation of the main currents of New England history. Mr. Borden is the latter-day version of the hanging judge of Salem; Lizzie is the passionate, repressed, upper-class unemployable Victorian spinster” and, they add, “don’t forget everyone hates a wicked stepmother.”⁷

Agnes de Mille is equally candid about her interpretation of Lizzie's motive in the choreography of *Fall River Legend*. What "lies at the heart of our story" she claims, is the American relationship to wealth, "this feeling of money and the power of money as a manifestation of God's will." She adds "in those days there was only one compensation for lack of a husband—money."⁸ Through music and dance, de Mille evoked the "boredom, utter boredom" of Lizzie's life, the heat of that fateful August day and a fictive, frustrated romance that pushed Lizzie toward murder. De Mille goes on to tell us that the murder meant "freedom, the reestablishment of love" for Lizzie and the axe "became a love object to Lizzie, a symbol of her freedom."⁹

Sharon Pollock presents a similar motive in her 1981 play *Blood Relations*. As a battered wife, Pollock had fantasies of killing her abusive husband but left him instead. For her, Lizzie mirrors her own experience as a woman who needed to break free of a powerful man to assert her independence and sense of self.¹⁰

Beeson, de Mille, Pollack and the many other creators of Lizzie Borden are clearly interested in questions of motive, but are the motives they find simply personal answers or does their quest for why she "done it" genuinely tell us something about American culture? At least part of the answer may lie in the fictional form they choose to explain motive. Creators of these fictions adopt two narrative patterns: either a romantic formula or a formula of an individual's quest for freedom and self-actualization.¹¹ While each of these patterns may carry American cultural themes such as violence or the individual's longing for liberation (claimed in some Borden fiction with a specifically feminist agenda), both also determine how Lizzie is represented as a gendered subject. In brief, the romances limit the range of Lizzie's motivations and her actions to stereotypical "feminine behavior." The "quest" allows her to act as a more self-actualized individual. Each, though, illustrates the role that gender plays in orientating Lizzie to central motifs of American culture.

Romance, of course, takes many forms in the Lizzie stories. Beeson's opera, for example, follows the form of the Freudian family romance. The passionate Lizzie's forbidden desires for her father and her sister's beau lead her to relentless competition with her stepmother and sister. The dark and dangerous mezzo soprano who sings the role of Lizzie and the light and gentle lyric soprano who plays her sister Margret bifurcate conventional aspects of womanhood. Lizzie's tyrannical father taunts her about the limits of her femininity and the extent of his patriarchal power: "You should have been born a man; then you could *take* what you want, instead of filling the house with hate. 'Father is to blame.' Is that what you tell yourself?"¹²

The family romance of Beeson's opera becomes more pathological in Elizabeth Engstrom's treatment, which realizes Beeson's suggestion of incest. Her 1990 novel *Lizzie Borden* leads us to believe that Lizzie became her dead mother's sexual surrogate as a child and as an adult shared a bisexual female lover with her father.¹³

The construction of illicit romance and desire in Engstrom's novel, as well as its fevered sexual passages, are reminiscent of aspects of Evan Hunter's novel *Lizzie*. Seduced by an aristocratic British lesbian while in Europe, Lizzie returns to Fall River feeling abandoned by her lover. Her frustration leads her to an outlet her lover warned her against—trysting with servants—the discovery of which leads to the murders.¹⁴

In each of these three romantic examples, Lizzie is sexual, passionate, angry and dangerous. The Lizzie Borden of Agnes de Mille's starkly beautiful ballet *Fall River Legend* adds hysteria to this troubling brew. When she dances a lyrical pas de deux with a handsome minister and he integrates her into a joyful community hoedown, it is her violent reaction to being wrenched out of those relationships by her stepmother that moves her to seize the fearsome axe and do away with her parents.

It has been said that romance is "the ultimate source and paradigm of all story telling."¹⁵ But on close examination these various permutations of the romance also make clear the way in which that pattern shapes Lizzie into a stereotype, determines her guilt, limits her actions, traps her, and motivates her. In these romantic narratives, motive becomes inextricably tied to gender.

Romantic convention demands that Lizzie be portrayed as a "feminine" half of a relationship—be it with a minister, doctor, sea captain, lesbian aristocrat, actress or Irish maid. From the prototypes of the opera to the high-strung Lizzie of the ballet,¹⁶ she embodies what the social construction of womanhood is conventionally thought to be. She fulfills the structural demands of romantic fiction for both polarized characters and a central love relationship.¹⁷

Is, then, the romance always a limiting narrative for female characters and the female reader?¹⁸ What one finds in the Lizzie Borden romances *is* an affirmation of a cultural belief that women are inherently different from men and will kill only in passion or madness. On the one hand Lizzie confirms that belief. On the other hand she violates the status quo by rebelling against patriarchal power, killing the patriarch and destroying the patriarchal family. For her transgression, she is punished either by being portrayed as lonely, childless and unfulfilled, or in the case of *Fall River Legend*, at the foot of the gallows.

Does Lizzie fare any better in the lesbian romances in which the romantic narrative is subverted by Lizzie's desires for various fictional women? Hardly. None of these relationships are portrayed as either positive or empowering. In fact, portrayals of her affairs or obsessions with other women consistently place Lizzie subordinate to a dominant partner and suggest these relationships actually stimulate her homicidal urges. It is as though the authors are saying that one kind of "unnaturalness" leads to another. Thus, while these versions of the tale may subvert the narrative structure of the romance, they do not challenge its social purpose. The limitations of a feminine gender role are presented critically but they still make clear the consequences of any deviation from the patriarchal script for women.¹⁹

The alternative to the romances is not the lesbian fiction that follows many of the conventions of the romance, but rather a smaller body of fiction that portrays Lizzie Borden as an individual oppressed by historical circumstances and struggling to break free of social constraints. In these films, plays and short stories, Lizzie emerges as an individual constrained by historical and social circumstances, sometimes engaged in a quest of self-actualization. Lizzie becomes a heroine who strikes a blow, or to be precise, twenty-nine blows, for freedom. But, here, as in the romances, and as in the history itself, Lizzie is a gendered subject, for it is her sex, her specific historical situation as a daughter and as a woman, that oppresses her and leads her to murder.

Furthermore, these texts feminize the American mythology of the outlaw. The outlaw, "a people's champion who espouses a type of higher law by defying the established 'system' of his times," is a well-established American folk type.²⁰ Lizzie, while she hardly meets the daring-do standards or Robin Hood ethics of Jesse James or Billy the Kid, is still in these renditions a social rebel who challenges unjust authority. Like an American Electra, she kills the tyrant, the rule of law, the oppressor, or the seducer. In so doing, she acts from the same sort of moral necessity that legitimates the outlaw.²¹

In these particular texts, the moral necessity of Lizzie's act can only be understood through a feminist lens. Unlike the violence found in popular American texts like *The Godfather* or *Shane* in which characters murder for the greater good of a family or community, in these Borden texts the family is the oppressive agent. Lizzie becomes a feminist outlaw who kills the patriarch and his consort.²²

Angela Carter's 1986 short story, "The Fall River Axe Murders" exemplifies this formula.²³ Carter's context is the oppressive August heat and the stultifying Calvinism of Fall River. She asks "is it not the 'naughty nineties' everywhere but in dour Fall River?" Elsewhere "champagne corks pop and women fall backwards in a crisp meringue of petticoats for fun and profit but not in Fall River." By contrast, Lizzie's immediate environment is confining. She is imprisoned in a house shaped like a coffin, in clothing that binds like a vice, her life is a sequence of "Empty days. Oppressive afternoons. Nights stalled in calm. Empty days." When Carter describes the household she sets out a clear feminist agenda explaining that Mr. Borden "owns" all the women in the house by either "marriage, birth, or contract." Lizzie, then, in Carter's formulation, is a prisoner of Victorian values, of Victorian material culture and of a particular Victorian patriarch, her father. She has no control over her economic or her sexual life. And so in the final paragraphs of the story, when her father slaughters some pet pigeons and they are baked into a pie for her gluttonous stepmother's pleasure, we need only for the author to evoke rather than describe the brutal conclusion with the last line of the story: "Outside, alone, in the already burning air, see! the angel of death roosts on the roof-tree."

With violence summoned, Lizzie's future is left to the reader. Does liberation mean that she will join the Belle Epoque and begin falling backwards in a crisp

meringue of petticoats? Or will she face the gallows for her crime as she does in de Mille's *Fall River Legend*?

Another example of the feminist-quest narrative, the 1981 play *Blood Relations*, determines Lizzie's future at the outset. In contrast to Carter's acute sense of history, playwright Sharon Pollock's diction, characters and concerns are thoroughly modern. The curtain opens on Lizzie many years after the deed. She is entertaining the actress Nance O'Neill, who, with her company, decides to reenact the crime. Lizzie is cast in the role of the Irish maid while Nance herself plays Lizzie.

Pollock suggests that Lizzie has had a sexual relationship with the Actress in the present and that she possibly had one with Dr. Patrick, a married Irish doctor, prior to the murders. Unlike the romances, though, these relationships do not define Lizzie. Although her father wants her to marry, she expresses a strong desire for a career. When their father threatens to alter their patrimony, Lizzie urges her sister Emma to talk to their father to "make him understand that we're people. *Individual people*, and we have to live separate lives, and his will should make it possible for us to do that."²⁴

Pollock used the Lizzie Borden story to reflect her own experience as a battered wife. She writes, "I would have killed to maintain my sense of self, to prevent a violation that was far more frightening and threatening than any blow, and which physical violence against my person was only the outward manifestation. And so it was with Lizzie."²⁵ While Lizzie's assertion of self echoes Pollack's experience, it also expresses a characteristic American individualism and links it to a specific female experience.

In Pollock's play, as in other feminist texts as well as in the romances, the Lizzie Borden story becomes a staging ground for a particular social agenda that includes feminist as well as "American" themes, and, as in other texts, gender shapes Lizzie's character and motivation.²⁶ In *Blood Relations*, the feminist script reminds us of the daily inequities of a patriarchal household and the limited expectations for women in a patriarchal society.

As a feminist script, *Blood Relations* accomplishes two ends. The first is well expressed by one literary critic: "... the play casts serious doubts on the goals of liberal feminism—to be an independent, free self, and calls for a more radical analysis of the ways in which these goals are effects of language and ideology."²⁷ The second is to address squarely and correctly the historical problem of Lizzie's acquittal. As we will see, both the defense and the prosecution of the historical Lizzie Borden pivoted on her social role as a "lady." The defense claimed that by definition a lady could not be a murderer, while the prosecution charged that a serious aberration of that role led Lizzie to parricide.

In addition to their political agendas, it is important to note that feminist texts like Pollack's play, as well as the romances emerge from a twentieth-century American social and historical context obsessed with sex.²⁸ So it should come as no surprise to find these fictions imbued with sexuality—repressed, heterosexual,

homosexual, incestuous and expressed in relationships latent and manifest between Lizzie and various male and female lovers.

Although without lovers, Lizzie becomes, for example, visually eroticized in the 1975 movie, "The Legend of Lizzie Borden."²⁹ The film focused on the question of the missing bloody dress (which in Borden lore is akin to the smoking gun) and answers that Lizzie committed her murders in the nude. The camera tracks Lizzie as she drops her restrictive clothing, murders her stepmother, washes and re-clothes herself then repeats the sequence two hours later to eliminate her father.³⁰

The sexuality of the naked, eroticized Lizzie, just like the lesbian Lizzies, the incestuous Lizzie, and the dark Electra of Beeson's opera endangers a social order based on patriarchal power and social formations. Once free of symbolic social restraints, Lizzie destroys the patriarch and shatters the patriarchal family. Thus, the sexual danger posed by this woman, and by extension all women, threads its way through the Lizzie Borden stories as a warning.

Lizzie comes to represent the fascination of our supposedly liberated age with a supposedly repressed era. The severe constraints on Lizzie's behavior and especially on her sexuality make her a potential land mine programmed to explode. Sex, when repressed, will lead to violence, these texts seem to say. Whether the historical Lizzie Borden was repressed or experienced repression is unknown—that writers claim she was and make much of it is clear. The relevant question as one theorist states it is not "why are we repressed? but rather, why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?"³¹ As a cautionary tale? So the present becomes delimited from the past? So that sexual repression becomes a metaphor for all repression? Or is the answer the simple psychological truth that through identifying with Lizzie Borden "we can enjoy a sublimated version of the emotions and symbolic significance of forbidden behavior."³²

Of course, this pleasure could conceivably be experienced by any reader, American or not. So how do the varied representations of Lizzie Borden answer the question posed at the outset about the persistent popularity of this historical figure for Americans? As depicted in fiction, Lizzie represents a fundamental contradiction in the definition of being an "American." On the one hand she is an individual striving for freedom—a quintessential American theme—and on the other hand she plays the social role of daughter. Historically, the contradictions between the individual and society are most deeply experienced by women, who are more constrained by the social order and whose "passion" is frequently seen as dangerous. So, in a sense, both types of renditions of Lizzie Borden are different dimensions of the same problematic. In the romance she unconsciously experiences the tension of being a daughter in an oppressive patriarchal situation, and her attempt to break out through a romantic script becomes a metaphor for freedom. In the feminist scripts, written primarily in the 1980s, Lizzie sees money and career as an escape from patriarchy but raises the question of whether a

woman can be free in the sense of being empowered in the world and also be feminine, maternal and sexualized.

The role that gender plays in orienting Lizzie to these central tensions of American culture is not, however, limited to fictional representations. Gender also constructs the historical Lizzie Borden as powerfully as it shapes the fictional Lizzies. In turning from the fictions to the history it becomes obvious that history is as much a text rooted in time and place as are the fictions.

Fall River in 1892 was a typical New England mill town that owed its success to a fast running river, an abundance of Yankee capital and an ample supply of cheap immigrant labor. In Fall River, the well-to-do lived at the top of a hill, the poorer folks at its base. Andrew Borden's household, however, was not in the better part of town, despite a considerable fortune amassed in various enterprises typical of an industrial capitalist economy. He kept his family in a small, rather shabby house with no electricity or indoor plumbing. His daughter Lizzie, unlike the daughters of eighteenth century New England households who spun, sewed, churned and baked, quite simply had very little to do. Unlike more educated women of her time, she did not aspire to the professions or to settlement house work. She tidied her room, ironed hankies, occasionally taught Sunday school and was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and treasurer of her church. At age 32, she had become quite clearly a member of that category, New England spinster. Fame found this quite uninteresting and by all reports rather unpleasant woman on a horrifically hot August morning in 1892. Around nine o'clock her stepmother was brutally murdered by nineteen blows to her face so violent that to quote an observer her "skull bones, hair, face, switches, and flesh matted into what looked like badly dressed steak."³³ Less than two hours later Andrew Borden was killed by ten blows, presumably from the same weapon so that "one half of his face was all but sliced off, half an eye hung on his broken cheek."³⁴ Following an inquest a week later Lizzie Borden was charged with the crime and was brought to trial on June 5, 1893. The substance of the trial consisted in trying to discover where Lizzie was at the time of the deed—she claimed to be either eating pears in the garden or searching for fish sinkers in the barn—and why, if she were guilty, neither her bloody dress nor the murder weapon had been found. Despite these very concrete issues, both the prosecution and the defense of Lizzie Borden revolved around less tangible questions of class and gender.

The prosecutor, Hosea Knowlton, well-expressed the centrality of these concepts to the case in his summation to the jury:

The prisoner at the bar is a woman, and a Christian woman, as the expression is used. It is no ordinary criminal that we are trying today. It is one of the rank of lady, the equal of your wife and mine, of your friends and mine, of whom such things had never been suspected or dreamed before. I hope I may never forget, nor in anything that I say here today lose sight of the

terrible significance of that fact . . . I am obliged to tread now upon a more delicate ground. The prisoner is a woman, one of that sex that all high-minded men revere, that all generous men love, that all wise men acknowledge their indebtedness to. It is hard, it is hard, Mr. Foreman and gentlemen, to conceive that woman can be guilty of crime but I am obliged to say, what strikes the justice of every man to whom I am talking, that while we revere the sex, while we show our courtesies to them, they are no worse than we. If they lack in strength and coarseness and vigor, they make up for it in cunning, in dispatch, in celerity, in ferocity. If their loves are stronger and more enduring than those of men, am I saying too much that, on the other hand, their hates are more undying, more unyielding, more persistent?’³⁵

The jury, twelve middle-aged, middle class New England gentlemen, proved unable to accept Knowlton’s radical reinterpretation of nineteenth-century sex roles, unable to accept the notion that women might be like men, and perhaps, most importantly, unable to envision the possibility that if Lizzie Borden could commit parricide might not their own wives and daughters be capable of the same act? Within an hour they returned a verdict of not guilty. In a strangely ironic way the constraints of her role as a nineteenth-century lady may have pushed Lizzie Borden to her crime but that same role saved her from the gallows. Lizzie, once cast in the role of lady, and she played this role to the hilt every day of the trial, could have no acceptable motive. Her acquittal was as determined by her role as the guilt of the fictional Lizzie is determined by the roles in which Beeson, de Mille, Carter and others cast her. The murder of Andrew and Abby Borden was, as one can tell from the description of the bodies, a crime of great passion, and *ladies* in Fall River in 1892 were known to be “passionless.”³⁶

With the sizable inheritance from her father’s estate, Lizzie, who changed her name to Lizbeth, and her sister Emma bought a stately Fall River mansion which they named Maplecroft. There Lizzie lived until her death in 1927.

As the historical Lizzie Borden is constructed through the trial she becomes not some sort of objective truth but a text as equally shaped by ideology and culture as are the fictions. The sharp distinction between women and men and their mutually exclusive characteristics are apparent in the case of the defense as well as in that of the prosecution. As one writer points out, nineteenth-century notions of gender might allow a gentleman to “wrestle with the good and evil within him but a woman . . . could only embody good or evil.”³⁷ That sort of essentialism reflected the criminology of the time. Lizzie’s social rank removed her from the depraved underclass that supposedly spawned criminals; her “goodness” was apparent through her church and temperance activities. Faced with such evidence the prosecution was unable to make a convincing case for her evil.

The many historical and cultural texts constructed around Lizzie Borden contain different possibilities for women. The opera, for example, is clear in its archetypal characterization of women—the virginal Mary/Margret, the sensual Eve/Lizzie. Both the romances and the feminist texts suggest that Lizzie’s “feminine” qualities are socially structured, and the trial transcript provides ample evidence of that structuring to a modern reader. Are, then, women murderers inherently different than men who commit the same crime, or are we simply eager to see them as such?³⁸ And do American women murder in unique and distinctive ways?

Historian Ruth Harris found in a study of several hundred French murderesses between 1880 and 1910, who by and large were acquitted like Lizzie, that contemporary criminological theory used in their defense “. . . was marked by a pervasive assessment of gender as a key factor determining the form, style and nature of criminality.” Harris goes on to write “The criminelle passionelle was acquitted because her stated motives seemed to re-inforce a portrait of the feminine which was neither socially dangerous nor morally deviant.”³⁹ Usually these women either shot or threw vitriol at men who had abandoned them or at women who had replaced them in their husbands’ affections. The difference between Lizzie Borden and these French women is they quite clearly *did* murder someone in a public act of social drama whereas the Borden murders were perpetrated in the secretive style of melodrama. Nonetheless, the gendered discourse around the French and the American crimes and their social meaning are similar. Just as the public discourse that surrounded Jack the Ripper in 1888 served to remind English women that the streets were not their appropriate venue⁴⁰ so did the extensive contemporary coverage of the Borden case reaffirm nineteenth-century ideas about sex roles and sexuality in a society anxious about changing gender roles. Women in 1892 wanted the vote, were going to college, were becoming independent. Recall Carter’s reminder that it was the “naughty 90s elsewhere but not in dour, sour Fall River.”⁴¹

The essential role of gender in constructing both the historical and cultural representations of Lizzie Borden dramatically demonstrates the “usefulness” of gender as an analytic tool. Quite simply, the meaning and development of the Borden myth can be understood only by a careful examination of gender in the fictions and the history. As historian Joan Scott reminds us, gender “provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction. When historians look for the ways in which the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships, they develop insight into the reciprocal nature of gender and society . . .”⁴² and, I would add, of culture. As seen most clearly in the trial transcript, Lizzie’s conviction or acquittal hinged upon the jury’s acceptance or denial of her gender and class defined role as “lady” thus filling Scott’s definition of gender as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Although the all-male jury held the power of life or death over Lizzie, her power was contained in her role as lady, which, by definition, precluded her conviction.

In the fictions, gender becomes a more expansive and metaphorical category. The romantic representations of Lizzie Borden written in the twentieth century reinforce limiting stereotypes of womanhood. They draw their language and characterizations from a narrow repertoire of roles and a narrow range of motivation—romantic disappointment, sexual frustration, response to an evil stepmother. These archetypal characters implicitly are part of a patriarchal social agenda that perpetuates a transhistorical, essentialist notion of woman rather than a concept of woman responding to a specific historical situation.

The fictions that offer alternative motivational possibilities—greed, avarice and a desire for independence—have their own political agenda. But these feminist texts, while no more or less “true” than the romances or the trial transcript, do open up a wider range of possibilities to their female characters and their female readers. These texts not only take a critical stance on the constraints of the late nineteenth century for women but they also offer a wider, albeit not particularly attractive, range of possibilities for women. In constructing Lizzie, they follow through on Prosecutor Knowlton’s suggestion that in some situations women may possibly be like men and may share men’s desire and capacity to murder.

As the story of Lizzie Borden proceeds from historical event to folk tale to romance to feminist texts, one feature remains constant: the gendered nature of the subject in all its complexity and contradictions. Even the rhetorical power of the children’s rhyme rests upon the shocking information that a daughter killed her parents. The construction of Lizzie Borden in these many stories incorporates women into classic American myths of violence, the outlaw and Calvinism, previously animated only by men, and confirms the judgement of the character in Colton and Miles’ 1934 play *Nine Pine Street* who tells Lizzie “you’re Americana.” The Lizzie Borden story in its varied manifestations is indeed Americana, but it reminds us that it is an America that is gendered in language, in subject, and in meaning.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge the generous readings given this essay by Beth Bailey, Martha Banta, Elizabeth Kuznesof and Janet Sharistianian. Their suggestions have improved it; its errors are mine alone.

1. Paul Boyer, “Lizzie Andrew Borden,” *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A biographical dictionary*, vol. 1, Edward T. James, ed. (Cambridge, 1971), 210-12; Joyce G. Williams, et al. *Lizzie Borden: A Case Book of Family and Crime in the 1890s* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1981); Robert Sullivan, *Goodbye Lizzie Borden* (London, 1989); Commonwealth vs. Lizzie Andrew Borden Upon an Indictment charging her with the Murder of Abby Durfee Borden and Andrew J. Borden 2 vols., Official trial minutes, Superior Court for the County of Bristol, Massachusetts, June 5-20, 1893.

2. Borden is also remembered in true crime stories and whodunits, genres that fall outside the scope of this paper.

3. Another interpretation of much of this same material is provided by Wayne Hobson in "Judging a Legend: Lizzie Borden and American Culture" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association, Kona Coast, Hawaii, 18 August 1991).

4. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-90* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1985), 16.

5. Among those who find Lizzie innocent are Edward D. Radin, *Lizzie Borden: The Untold Story* (New York, 1961).

6. Sharon Pollock, *Blood Relations* in Michele Wandor, ed. *Plays by Women*, volume three (London, 1984), 96.

7. Jack Beeson. "The Autobiography of 'Lizzie Borden' (An Epistolary History of the Composition of Beeson's Opera)" *Opera Quarterly* 1986 v.4: 1, 15-42.

8. Agnes DeMille, *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (Boston, 1968), 120. See also William M. Kunstler. "DeMille's Borden—How Important is Truth?" *New York Times* May 13, 1979, 22.

9. DeMille, *Lizzie Borden*.

10. Sharon Pollock, *Blood Relations*, 124. See also Madonne Miner, "Lizzie Borden Took an Ax: Enacting *Blood Relations*," *Literature in Performance* 6 (April 1986) 10-21.

11. John G. Cawelti writes of the defining characteristics of romance: "... its organizing action is the development of a love relationship . . . The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent . . ." in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 41.

12. Jack Beeson, *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait in Three Acts. Opera* (New York, 1967).

13. Elizabeth Engstrom, *Lizzie Borden* (New York, 1990). Engstrom's chaotically dysfunctional Borden family also features an alcoholic Emma, who periodically disappears to be abused by unknown men, a kindly midwife stepmother and an absent British mentor who sends Lizzie self-help literature. In a discussion of another lesbian novel, Jean Radford writes: "Unable to take up a rival feminine position because of her hostile mother, she identifies with the loving parent and his masculinity. She defends herself against her mother's rejection by a 'reaction-formation,' converts the painful anger into idealisation, and the feminine is taken as the love-object. In Lacanian terms, she takes the loved one's (i.e., her father's) desire as her own." Jean Radford, *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* (London, 1986), 102.

14. Evan Hunter, *Lizzie: A Novel* (New York, 1984).

15. Northrup Frye quoted in Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York, 1981), 105.

16. In the ballet, Lizzie's character varies depending upon the interpretation of the ballerina dancing the role. For a comparison of three recent interpretations by dancers with the American Ballet Theater see Anna Kisselgoff, "3 Ballerinas' Visions of 'Fall River Legend'" *New York Times*, June 3, 1991, B1. Kisselgoff writes "One is vulnerable, another impassioned, the third explosive." See also Anna Kisselgoff, "Cynthia Gregory and Ax in 'Fall River Legend', and 'Return of Dance-Drama Brings a 1948 de Mille'" *New York Times*, June 1, 1991, B15.

17. Radford in *The Progress of Romance* writes that "The polarizations offered in melodrama, fantasy and romantic fictions may certainly refer us back to (psychologically) primitive ways of seeing the world, but whether this 'regressive' experience is a positive or a negative one is again determined not by the romance itself but by the interaction of text and context." (17) Radford is convinced that "generic forms are . . . signals in a social contract between writers and readers" and that "for cultural historians, the study of genres may provide a mediation between literary history and social history . . ." (9).

18. Janice Radway, following the theoretical insights of Nancy Chodorow, defines the romance as "a quest for motherly nurturance" and this most certainly is a prominent aspect of the Borden romances. In *Fall River Legend*, for example, following the murders, Lizzie dances with the ghost of her dead mother and in most Borden romances an antagonistic relationship with the stepmother is contrasted with an idyllic childhood. Radway also points out a social purpose to the romance: "... each romance is a mythic account of how women achieve fulfillment in patriarchal society . . . because central events are structurally the same . . . romances may still function as active agents in the maintenance of the ideological status quo by virtue of their hybrid status as realistic novels and mythic ritual." Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 17.

19. Two lesbian novels are Evan Hunter, *Lizzie: A Novel* (see note 14) and Elizabeth Engstrom, *Lizzie Borden* (see note 13). Hunter's book, in particular, is written in a breathless, pornographic style. Jean Radford writes of early "coming out" novels that "depend . . . heavily on the forms of popular heterosexual romance." Radford, *The Progress of Romance*, 110.

20. Richard Meyer discusses the uniquely American aspects of this folktale in "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktale," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17 (May - December, 1980), 94-124. Eric Hobsbawm identifies the universal qualities of the type in *Bandits* (New York, 1969). And Richard Slotkin contends that outlaws "as symbols of class or cultural resistance . . . are twentieth

century phenomena although they have always been a part of American folk myth." Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, xiii.

21. John G. Cawelti writes of the "moral necessity" that sanctions violence in "Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (March 1975), 521-41.

22. Numerous scholars have identified both the American demand for and national identification with motifs of violence although as John G. Cawelti points out, Americans cling tenaciously to their sense of themselves as "a non-violent law-abiding people" who yet believe in the "moral necessity of violence" in specific situations. *Ibid.*

23. Angela Carter, "The Fall River Axe Murders" in *Saints and Strangers* (New York, 1986), 7-31.

24. Pollock, *Blood Relations*, 113.

25. Pollock, *Blood Relations*, 123-4.

26. In a commentary on *Blood Relations*, Madonne Miner points out the limitations of Pollock's script. "Unlike much early feminist drama, which assumed that women eventually might trade the role of victim for a role of power and independence, *Blood Relations* insists that under patriarchy the woman who trades in her 'victim script' will find herself just as fiercely trapped in the script of 'victimizer.'" Miner, "Lizzie Borden", 11.

27. *Ibid.*, 20.

28. David Brion Davis makes the point, however, that most fictional murders written between 1789 and 1860 involved sexual conflict. *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca, New York, 1957). And Foucault writes, "Among its many emblems, our society wears that of talking sex." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, volume I* (New York, 1978), 77.

29. *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*. Directed by Paul Wendkos, ABC, February 10, 1975.

30. Jessica Benjamin discusses the political aspects of erotic imagery and literature in "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination" in Ann Snitow et al, eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York, 1983), 280-99.

31. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 8-9.

32. John R. Brazil makes this suggestion in "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981), 163-184.

33. De Mille, *Dance of Death*, 40.

34. De Mille, *Dance of Death*, 36.

35. Quoted in Edmund Pearson, ed., *The Trial of Lizzie Borden: Edited, with a History of the Case* (Garden City, New York, 1937), 344-5.

36. Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology" in Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York, 1979), 162-181.

37. Cara Robertson, "Representing 'Miss Lizzie': Class and Gender in the Borden Case," (Senior Honors Thesis, Harvard University, 1990).

38. For a popular study of female murderers see Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York, 1980). Jones specifically discusses Lizzie Borden.

39. Ruth Harris, "Melodrama, Hysteria, and Feminine Crimes of Passion in the Fin-de-Siecle," *History Workshop* 25 (Spring 1988), 31-63. See also Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siecle* (New York, 1989).

40. Judith R. Walkowitz, "Science and the Seance; Transgressions of Gender and Genre in Late Victorian London," *Representations* (Spring 1988), 3-28.

41. Carter, *Saints and Strangers*, 8.

42. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (December, 1986).