

There's something in the tea: murder and materiality in *Dark Angel* (2016)

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In her exploration of Neo-Victorianism, Cora Kaplan comments that 'the modern obsession with all things Victorian' is situated within a desire to 'know and to "own" the Victorian past through its remains: the physical and written forms that are its material history' (Kaplan 2007, 1). *Dark Angel* aired on ITV in 2016, 'based on the true story' of Mary Ann Cotton (1832-1873), a woman from County Durham, UK, charged with the death of her stepson. It is claimed that Mary Ann murdered up to twenty-five people, including husbands, her children, stepchildren, her mother, and lover. She allegedly poisoned her victims with arsenic tea, although no arsenic was recovered from the home as evidence. Accidental death was rejected as a possibility at the murder trial, and historians have questioned the evidence of intentional poisoning, given that arsenic was present in all manner of household items, including wallpaper: 'How this was deduced is not clear: today's tests, which measure appearance of arsenic along the nail or hair shaft, were not then possible' (Flanders 2010, 391-2).

In common with most dramas based on a real-life subject, *Dark Angel* navigates the divide between fact and fiction with some unease. In order to explore the relationship between murder and materiality in the drama, we might first address a review from *The Independent*, which identifies how *Dark Angel* navigates Neo-Victorian objects as signifiers:

You'll appreciate the meticulous attention to period detail too, if you've any eye for it, from the aspidistra in the window to the piles of florins to the diagnoses of 'gastric fever.' Let's just say that if you ever meet a potential spouse who takes an unusually intense interest in the life assurance industry, you should be careful about taking tea with them. (O'Grady, 'Tale of a Cotton Most Rotten' in *The Independent* 29 October 2016, 85).

The aspidistra, a plant well-known to Victorian houses due to its ability to thrive in dark places, functions as a marker of nineteenth-century authenticity. The TV production also distinguishes itself through the monetary signifiers for insurance payments, which are counted out meticulously in close-ups following the death of Mary Ann's various family members. In *Dark Angel*, Kaplan's idea of the 'desire to know and to own' is implicated

through three distinct but related presentations of Neo-Victorian objects. The first of these categories falls taxonomically into domestic objects (spoons, lace, dresses, tea pots). These are commodities to be bought and pawned, exchanged or obtained by Mary Ann herself with an absence of sentimentality. Central among these items is the infamous teapot, from which Mary Ann is presumed to have poisoned her victims with arsenic tea. For the fictional Mary Ann it is an old thing, shoddy and not for special occasions, but its status in the TV show, as part of Mary Ann's celebrity, is marked. The tea pot's status as a highly-charged curio implicated in sensational murder is maintained as a centerpiece to an exhibition of Cotton's life at Beamish Museum (County Durham) which followed on from the national TV drama coverage of the case. Thus our contemporary consumption of Mary Ann is directly navigated through our curation of objects.

The correlation of objects and commodity in *Dark Angel* becomes more explicit in Mary Ann's repeated use of her body as sexual currency, which functions as the second object category in this argument. The TV version of Mary Ann Cotton (played by Joanne Froggatt) deploys her body as sexual currency to gain economic security, but this display of the body-as-object is absent in explicit sex scenes, and in any visualisation of her death on the scaffold. This representation of Mary Ann's body will be understood through Ruth Penfold-Mounce's discussion of our objectification of the criminal body, 'engaging with understandings about how and why the human remains of lawbreakers have been handled as both objects with special and also have inspired fascination in consumers' (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 251). Mary Ann's body is an object which is present and absent, a reading which navigates the ways in which we appropriate the historical criminal corpse. Viewers are not given the spectacle of murderer on the scaffold: we witness her approach but not the actual procedure and moment of death, which the historical record explains was botched, and thereby both traumatic and lengthy (Wilson 2013, 151-2 and Flanders 2011, 393). However, her criminal afterlife, with her public visibility in plays, as an exhibition curio, and relatedly through objects (the noose, her prison stool, the tea pot) signify how our consumption of her body is inflected with notions of celebrity. Paradoxically, perhaps, the third category of objects, the abject corpses of Mary Ann's victims, as well as the graphic description of her father's dead body returning home, testify to what Mark Seltzer has characterized as 'wound culture.' In its exploration of Neo-Victorian trauma, the TV show thereby provides a concerted reflection on how Cotton's legacy has been revisited and navigated through both materiality and material culture.

### 1) Domestic Objects – Curation and Thing Theory

The ITV two-part series, *Dark Angel*, takes as its subject the life of Mary Ann Cotton, a nineteenth-century woman from County Durham who was found guilty of murdering her stepson, and is suspected of dispatching several other members of her family (she was executed in 1873). The TV adaptation draws heavily on the biography about Mary Ann, written by David Wilson (2013), which sensationally frames her as ‘Britain’s first female serial killer.’ She allegedly poisoned her victims with arsenic in tea, and the teapot becomes a repeated but paradoxical signifier in the ITV drama and in exhibition culture, standing in for both murder and home, a tension which explores how far Mary Ann both subscribed to, and departed from, traditional versions of femininity (as nurse, wife, mother). Victorian domestic objects in the show extend far beyond their conventional utility, but simultaneously lack the burden of memory and sentiment for the characters, and therefore challenge perceptions of the Victorian period as embedded in mourning ritual.<sup>1</sup> Objects only carry the burden of heritage and memory for the viewers, who are inculcated in contemporary Neo-Victorian curation.

In the opening scene of the show, the narrative of Mary Ann’s life is framed by the location of Durham Gaol, the noose, and the scene of execution, with a final conversation between the murderer and her stepfather (so the rest of the narrative functions as a form of retrospection before Mary Ann’s death). The title credits explain this is ‘based on a true story,’ which offers some semblance of authenticity to the proceeding tale. The episode then cuts to Mary Ann, who has returned from Cornwall to Seaham, County Durham, with her husband William Mowbray. At this point she relays the news to her family that she has recently buried several of her children there. This is also the first scene in which the ubiquitous tea pot features: here Mary Ann is nursing a surviving baby at the dining table in the small family cottage, and centrally, in the foreground of the shot, we see a rather plain black teapot. Mary’s mother exclaims ‘I’ll put the kettle on for tea,’ to which Mary replies, ‘I can’t believe you’ve still got that old teapot... nothing says home like that does’ (*Dark Angel* 2016). At this point, the teapot acquires a symbolic relationship with working-class womanhood in the period, with all the association of simple comfort and the homely hearthside that such an item might suggest. It reappears when Mary has buried another child and they leave the family home, as Mowbray has found work on the docks. At this point, her

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<sup>1</sup> See Brown (2001) for a foundational discussion of ‘thing theory’. Brown maintains that objects become ‘things’ when they exceed their utilitarian value and acquire a symbolic or emotional resonance.

mother gives her the teapot, saying it is ‘to remind you of home.’ This seems relatively innocuous, correlating as it does women and the domestic sphere. Rather more ominously, Mary Ann is pregnant again, and has explained to her mother that she just wants her husband to leave her alone, as their sexual encounters just result in another mouth to feed, to which her mother responds ‘this is just how life is for women, and no amount of mithering will change that.’ There are several issues in this short scene which offer some insight into our experience of Neo-Victorian objects. There is direct causality drawn between Mary Ann’s ownership of the teapot and her final end on the gallows. Indeed, this point is emphasized by Mary Ann’s handing the teapot to her surviving daughter (who later dies in similar circumstances to the other children): ‘Isabella, hold your mam’s teapot for us.’ Despite the opening claim to a ‘true story’, it is uncertain whether the teapot was the means of administering arsenic in the real case. The historical record identifies that Mary Ann attended the bedsides of each of her children, her husbands, her mother, and her lover/lodger. The prosecution argued that this gave her ample opportunity to shuffle off relatives for insurance money. The otherwise woefully inadequate defence hinged on the possibility of accidental poisoning of family members, as arsenic is common enough in the household of the nineteenth century (Whorton 2010). Mary Ann certainly purchased arsenic as a common remedy to clean beds and mattresses. Evidence from a neighbour who helped Mary Ann clean explained that she used arsenic for this purpose, and additional testimony from a chemist states that she had purchased arsenic from him in 1869 (Flanders 2011, 389, 392 and ‘The West Auckland Poisoning Cases’ in *Manchester Guardian*, 26 February 1873, 5). Bottles of medicine were found, but no teapot containing arsenic was part of the trial, nor indeed any testimonies.

The centrality of the poisoned teapot in *Dark Angel* actually hinges on contemporary curation of Mary Ann Cotton’s legacy in the North East of England. David Wilson notes that Beamish Museum, an immersive experience of life in Victorian County Durham, claims to own the murderer’s teapot, ‘reputed to once have belonged to Cotton’ (Wilson 2013, 13). Indeed, Wilson’s interview with Kate Reeder (the Keeper of Social History and Collections Administration at Beamish) demonstrates the central point about the teapot in relation to the series: ‘it’s wonderful to have objects that have stories attached to them... it’s the best kept teapot at Beamish’ (Wilson 2013, 193). Less important to the TV show is factual accuracy: rather, it buys into the construction of the celebrity criminal. Ruth Penfold-Mounce notes that the contemporary public experiences these murderous histories through a ‘fascinated

consumerism and the posthumous celebration of the criminal via crime tourists and tourism; souvenirs, keepsakes, and trophies; and mediated consumption' (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 251). This pertains both to the actual physical body of the criminal, as will be explored later in this chapter, but also, to the objects associated with the murder, illustrating 'the appeal and enthrallment of society with the desire to consume the grisly through seeing' (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 256). Other nineteenth-century figures have parts of their physical body preserved in the archive, including William Burke, the Scottish body snatcher who with his accomplice William Hare murdered 17 people between 1827 and 1828, to sell the corpses to Edinburgh Medical School for dissection. A book bound with Burke's skin remains on display as a museum exhibit in the Police Museum, Edinburgh (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 257). Mary Ann was given a quick burial, so her body itself is absent from surviving material artefacts, but the objects associated with her death and her suspected crimes retain an element of mystique which in some ways serve as a stand-in for witnessing her execution (this is never shown in the TV show). Sarah Tarlow explains that this is a form of 'glamour':

Glamour is a property of a person, but it can be contagious and associative also. Glamour can rub off onto objects and other bodies that have been in close contact with the source... People have sought to connect with the glamour of crime through material objects – most notably the body itself, but if not the actual body then through material things that were in some way contagiously related to it – locations, objects owned or used by the criminal or the victim, things associated with the crime or the criminal process (Tarlow 2016, 222).

The artefact stands in for the corpse, in this instance, as the audience cannot recover Mary Ann's physical body or its parts in the museum. But the audience can vicariously experience the 'glamour of crime' through the museum's tea pot, and indeed the TV show. This correlation between the object and *Dark Angel* is emphasized in the museum's web publicity in 2016 (following the screening of the series): 'Did you watch ITV's two-part drama, *Dark Angel*? We were glued to our television screens for three hours, fascinated by the story of Mary Ann Cotton, the County Durham serial killer, but "Beamish spotting" too' ('Mary Ann Cotton's Teapot at Beamish' 2016). The webpage then describes objects in the museum 'reputed' to belong to Mary Ann, and offers some details as to the provenance of the teapot in the collection (as well as the wooden stool purported to belong to Mary Ann from her time in Durham Gaol). In common with the ITV drama, this short article unequivocally identifies the

teapot as implicated in the murders: ‘She used arsenic to poison her victims, administered in a comforting cup of tea, made in a small teapot reserved for the purpose’ (‘Mary Ann Cotton’s Teapot at Beamish’ 2016). In terms of the historical record, however, we have witness who explain Mary Ann nursed her victims, and in the testimony of one Mrs Smith, ‘she saw Mary Ann give Natrass [sic] cups of tea from two small teapots that Cotton kept on a table in her lover’s room, and we can infer that this was likely to have been the means by which she poisoned her victims’ (Wilson 2013, 113). Newspaper coverage has explained that her only surviving husband, James Robinson, noted that ‘whenever she [Mary Ann] gave them anything, they vomited, and were sick and purged’ (‘The Suspected Wholesale Poisoning in Durham: Extraordinary Revelations’ in *Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1872, 7). Similarly the account from Jane Hedley, a witness to Joseph Natrass’s death, describes Mary Ann giving Natrass something to drink, and that when she was cleaning with Mary Ann, the latter ‘sent me to her house for a pot that stood on the pantry shelf. She said there was soft soap & arsenic in this pot. I went for and got this pot and showed it to the Prisoner. She said it was the right one & what she got to clean beds with’ (Wilson 2013, 90). From the speculation that a teapot *may* have been the means of administering poison (a ‘pot’ *may* be a synonym for a ‘teapot’ after all), the museum’s narrative of the black teapot in the archive imparts authenticity on an otherwise unremarkable object. This is not extraordinary, as Tarlow explains: ‘the ubiquity in local and provincial museums of trivial objects with some association to a local celebrity bear witness to the appeal of metonymic material culture’ (Tarlow 2016, 223). Indeed, it is the stories, such as the ITV drama, or the museum narrative, which provide authenticity to such objects:

Authenticity is a valued characteristic of a thing or a body... Objects increase massively in value... when there are stories that we can tell about them... The *story* need not be true, but the *object* must be the original, authentic and true subject of the fiction (Tarlow 2016, 224).

The fascination (or glamour) of the teapot is less about the object itself, and more about the intersection of narrative, audience, and materiality – its role as a ‘thing.’ It is related to how objects exert meaning beyond their physical reality, or as Bill Brown explains, ‘things’ are ‘what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialisation as objects or the mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous or metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems’ (Brown 2001, 5).

The same can be said for some of the other items which feature in *Dark Angel*. Two particular scenes are of especial importance here. Following her marriage to James Robinson in 1867, Mary Ann is shown in a draper's shop, purchasing fabric for her new child's christening robe, but she is prevented from doing so until she pays a previous bill of £7 6s 4d (presumably a bill she has incurred as a consequence of her conspicuous consumption). She then encourages Robinson's son to sell his dead mother's possessions (lace), and steals money from Robinson's account. The audience is clearly expected to share Robinson's outrage at Mary Ann's behaviour, and the argument between the two of them precipitates Mary Ann's departure from the marital home. Certainly the historiography suggests that Mary Ann owned money in various stores (Wilson 2013, 91), but there isn't actually much evidence to suggest she sold Robinson's dead wife's possessions. Beyond portraying Mary Ann as ruthless in her pursuit of economic gain, the scene also relates to a Neo-Victorian revision of mourning and ritual. In her study *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914*, Julie-Marie Strange notes that 'Most of the images we have of "the Victorian celebration of death" have been selected and privileged over others; the Victorian culture of death is a myth of our making' (Strange 2005, 20). Manual workers (such as would be found in the communities where Mary Ann lived and worked) may experience death and grief in a different but no less significant way than the model of high mourning and funereal excess with which we might stereotypically associate the Victorians. Importantly, the working classes did commemorate their dead through objects of remembrance (Strange, 2005, 213) but more economically than other social groups, due to necessity: 'seemingly worthless objects could adopt extra meaning for those who clung to them as mementoes' (Strange, 2005, 214). Mary Ann transgresses the mourning rituals associated with the middle classes, of course (here symbolised by Robinson), but she also transgresses those of her own social group. For Robinson, the lace is a treasured item to be passed down to the next generation separated from financial transaction, but in Mary Ann's eyes, it has no memories attached to it, and signifies little but economic worth.

Paradoxically, perhaps, Mary Ann also overinvests in material objects, due to their commodity status. In one such scene, she is shown carefully, almost lovingly, polishing spoons (presumably silver or silver plate), at the same time as the police inform her there will be an inquest into the death of Charles Robert Cotton which means she cannot claim any insurance money on the boy (her murder charge and subsequent execution in 1873 rested on

this child's death). The motive for her crimes is thereby represented as an overinvestment in materiality. Her stepfather asks her 'What do you want of us all Mary Ann?' to which she replies 'Just what every woman wants – more. More than coal dust and childbirth and men who think saying I love you is enough. More than this world can give me.' Her approach to material goods (like the lace and her dead mother's dress, of which she says 'it'll do for clearing up in') is divorced from human sympathy or memory, and only perceived as part of a broader pattern of commodity exchange. She perceives these items in their purely utilitarian and capitalist function. As she says to the Robinson boy, 'Your sainted mother doesn't need lace, does she, where she's gone?'

As further evidence of this argument, it is worth addressing the graphic retelling of Mary Ann's father's death, which is presented through Mary Ann's story told to Joseph Natrass on his deathbed. Natrass says 'I always thought I'd die down the pit' and Mary Ann replies:

Like me dad... Put him in a wheelbarrow and brought him home to my mam in a sack labelled property of South Hetton Coal Company. I was eight years old. I said then I'll never be a miner's lass as long as I live.

Arguably, this provides a critique of the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution, set against the backdrop of the mining communities in the North East, and the trauma these communities experienced, both then and now. In this way, the viewer is offered an interpretation of Mary Ann as a product of the monstrosity of capitalism. The objectified and expendable body, literalised as property and labelled accordingly, converts into Mary Ann's crimes against her family. Thus the body of Mary Ann's father stands in for an examination of North East trauma:

The analysis of the nineteenth century as a harbinger of our own trauma culture is currently gaining critical mass as another neo-Victorian concern with evident political implications. Increasingly, the period is configured as a temporal convergence of multiple historical traumas still awaiting appropriate commemoration and full working-through. These include both the pervasive traumas of social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation, and the more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest, international conflicts, and trade wars that punctuated the nineteenth century. (Kohlke 2008a, 7).



This monstrous capitalism, birthed in the Industrial Revolution, bespeaks a legacy still very important to North East region following the Miners' Strike in the 1980s. It is also a trauma which has yet to be resolved, given the high unemployment and broken communities which persist following Margaret Thatcher's policies of 'profit- and market-led restructuring of economic life' (Milne 2004, ix). In articulating a critique of capitalism, *Dark Angel* suggests a very real commemoration of North East history.

## 2) Sexuality and the Scaffold - The Celebrity Body of Mary Ann Cotton

One of David Wilson's key arguments in his study of Mary Ann hinges on the idea of her invisibility. He says 'she has become unseen' (Wilson 2013, 12), especially when we consider figures like Jack the Ripper, and given the wealth of films, books, histories and other cultural experiences associated with his persona and crimes. Related to this idea of invisible histories, Kate Mitchell explains that one role of Neo-Victorianism is 'disrupting and diverting the gaze of traditional histories. Rather than falsify and trivialise the past it produces multiple stories, at least some of which challenge and critique official historiographies and other dominant images of the past' (Mitchell 2010, 6). If we think about the ways in which Neo-Victorianism reclaims and uncovers lost histories, Mary Ann clearly represents the occluded and aberrant woman, and ITV's *Dark Angel* contributes to this historical recovery. However, such a model fails to account for Mary Ann's public visibility both at the time of her trial, and her subsequent incarnations in popular culture. This is not to say her cultural afterlife is equivalent to the Whitechapel murders, but rather that the narrative and objects associated with Mary Ann retain some degree of 'glamour.' Neither did her historical erasure seem assured directly after her death. Madame Tussaud's added a 'Portrait Model' of Mary Ann to the 'Chamber of Horrors' in 1873 (Connolly 2016, 164). Around the same time, the West Auckland Fair displayed a group of waxworks, including one of Mary Ann, and her photograph was circulated in Durham (Connolly 2016, 163). Broadside publications, which had otherwise nearly vanished by this point, printed retellings of Mary Ann's life and death (Flanders 2011, 393 and Baring-Gould, n.d). A cast of her head was taken, and a lurid play detailing her life and history, *The Life and Death of Mary Ann Cotton*, was staged at the New Gaiety Theatre of Varieties in Hartlepool (Connolly 2016, 164, and Flanders 2011, 394). Across the pond, Mary Ann was sensationally hailed as 'England's Borgia' (*The Atlanta Constitution*, 29 October 1872, 4), an analogy which has been repeated in the recent true crime history of Mary Ann, *Dark Angel: Britain's First Female Serial Killer* (Connolly 2016, 177). Certainly in the North East region, she enjoys

ongoing coverage in newspapers as a minor historical celebrity ('Jail bulldozers could unearth hanged villains' in *Evening Chronicle* 15 November 2012, 25), with discussions about the unearthing bodies such as Mary Ann's at Durham Gaol providing an especially vivid encounter with the physical object of the criminal corpse. These instances of fascination with the body of Mary Ann (through waxwork, photography performance, excavation) accords with Sarah Tarlow's discussion of the criminal body:

The curious afterlives of criminal bodies blur the boundary between body and person – and if that boundary is a fish in a barrel to today's cultural theorists, these curious afterlives also problematise the distinction between body and object. However, objects which were formerly part of the criminal body do retain the glamour of corporeal authenticity which gave them an extra charge (Tarlow 2016, 225).

This essay has already addressed how proximity to Mary Ann and her crimes has promoted interest in material objects through 'glamour' – the teapot, or the execution rope and the stool on which she purportedly sat in prison – a collection of items also known as murderabilia (Denham 2016, 231). But the body itself can also function as one of these memory assets, in museums, and through popular culture. Melissa Schrift argues for this notion of the body-as-object, claiming 'The criminal body retains an iconic status in the collective memory of the living' (Schrift, 2016, 196). Indeed Ruth Penfold-Mounce maintains that 'a sensational spectacle of death in association with an executed criminal and his victim' is a hallmark of contemporary media forms (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 259), and explicitly correlates this culture with fictional retelling of such events: 'Public fascination and consumption of the criminal corpse is now largely fed by factual news accounts or theatrical fictional portrayals. Viewing the corpse, whether criminal or otherwise... is most popular when it is fictionalised and portrayed through contemporary means.' (Penfold-Mounce 2010, 262). The fictional intervention in *Dark Angel* also constructs Mary Ann's body as a spectacular object, but perhaps not in quite the way we might imagine. The opening scene is located at Durham Gaol, where Mary Ann awaits her execution, and the closing scene shows her walk to the scaffold then the noose is placed around her neck. She declares 'heaven is my home' before the black sack is placed over her head, then the screen blacks out and we witness the conclusion of the drama.

The question remains as to why the audience is spared the brutal visualization of Mary Ann's death. Of course part of this omission may relate to the conditions in which she died. Her executioner was one William Calcraft (1800-1879), who was noted for his incompetence in the profession. He insisted on the use of the 'short drop' to obviate the possibility of decapitation meant that criminals often spent some time on the scaffold before death, and on several occasions, Calcraft had to intervene and pull on the legs of the criminal to hasten the process. Unfortunately, Mary Ann's execution was equally botched and it seems she suffered a great deal in her final moments: 'Mary Ann dropped into the void beneath [the scaffold], her neck dropping to one side. Her body jerked heavily and Calcraft put his hands on her shoulders. On releasing his hands, Mary Ann's body continued to jerk. Reports said it took three minutes for the body to subside from twitching' (Connolly 2016, 154). The death scene was so traumatic that the under sheriff nearly fainted (Wilson 2013, 152). However, as this article has already discussed at some length, audiences are genuinely fascinated by the objects associated with crime, and indeed the criminal body. More broadly, this is also a visible trope in Neo-Victorian dramas. Kohlke and Gutleben note that 'the nineteenth century has become a prominent focal point for literary investigations into and fictional re-enactments of historical trauma from contemporary perspectives' (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010, 2). This is not simply 'secondary witnessing, in the sense of bearing witness to a victim or survivor's actual first-hand testimony of trauma via empathic listening, viewing, or reading, [but] *after-witness[ing]*, in the sense of the fictional recreation of trauma that both testifies to and stands in for inadequate, missing, or impossible acts of primary witness-bearing to historical trauma' (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010, 7).

Twenty-first century culture is also heavily invested with what Mark Seltzer has defined as 'wound culture'. He explains that 'This is a culture centred on trauma (Greek for wound): a culture of the atrocity exhibition, in which people wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories' (Seltzer 1998, 2). In tracing Mary Ann's history, *Dark Angel* participates in a very common obsession, which actually emerged in the Victorian period: 'During the course of the nineteenth century, there is a radical shift in the understanding of crime, a shift in focus from the criminal act to the character of the actor: the positing of the category of the dangerous individual... By the turn of the [twentieth] century, serial killing has become something to do (a lifestyle, a career, or calling, and the serial killer has become something to be (a species of person)' (Seltzer 1998, 2). In tension with this contemporary 'wound culture' which actively seeks out images of crime and death, is the historical context

whereby execution became a private punishment by the State. The Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868 ended the scenes of public executions which previous centuries had witnessed. Randall McGowen notes that petitioners for the abolition of capital punishment often focused on ‘the monstrous crowd, and the insistence that punishment was a moral and private, rather than a political and public, event’ (McGowan 1994, 259). Anxieties abounded about the corrupting effects on audiences who witnessed execution, the absence of any moral lesson and the festive atmosphere among spectators suggested the ‘morbid, vicious and savage character of the people. Flocking to see the body suffer was as worthy of blame as inflicting it; indeed there was no distinction between the two acts... The problem with the gallows was that it first created interest, then fascination, and finally a desire to emulate the hero of the spectacle’ (McGowen 1994, 259-60). By comparison, the absence of the drop scene in *Dark Angel* suggests a lacuna which in some part replays both nineteenth-century debates about public executions and contemporary discussions about the appropriate nature of showing extended scenes of tortured suffering and degradation in Neo-Victorian texts. Instead, the viewing audience receives an image of mediated death reflecting the fact that execution should be private. This also allows viewers to create a (fabricated) distance from the nineteenth century: we like to think we are better than the historical subjects who gleefully assembled before a criminal on the gallows, in much the same way as we erroneously like to think we have liberated ourselves from the supposedly stuffy Victorian approach to sexuality (Foucault 1979, 7). This seeming contradiction between ‘wound culture’ which actively seeks out images of violence and horror, and one which shies away from graphic images of the moment of death, is resolved in the acknowledgement that texts such as *Dark Angel* are media events: historical distance allows the audience to retreat back into a contemporary moment where the gallows do not exist as a potential punishment, and we can luxuriate in the glamour of the criminal without bearing witness to consequences. This partial account might be located as part of a broader trend which Jack Denham identifies as ‘selective memory’ of the criminal corpse: ‘While it is clear that the immortalising of criminal through exhibitions, film or merchandise will lead to altered remembrance, all aspects of a criminal’s behaviour, personality and lifespan are not remembered with equal diligence. Representations of the criminal dead are extremely discriminating when it comes to who will be exhibited, and what parts of their lives they will be celebrated for – a central process of selective remembrance’ (Denham 2016, 230). The ignominious end of Mary Ann struggling for several minutes on a scaffold does not accord with the sensational image of a celebrity criminal. This notion of ‘selective remembrance’ can be understood as a move

towards to a popular cultural representation of criminality, of which *Dark Angel* is clearly a Neo-Victorian example.

Whilst Mary Ann's final tortured moments as a criminal are absent from *Dark Angel*, the spectacle of her body as a sexual object is foregrounded. This is a Neo-Victorian trope, which Marie-Luise Kohlke terms *sexsation*: '[an] obsession with "exhibiting" the underside of nineteenth century propriety and morality, a sensationalised world of desire and novelty, where any sexual fantasy might be gratified' (Kohlke 2008b, 235). Indeed, Mary Ann's mother speculates whether her daughter is accepting money for the sexual favours which the viewing audience has just witnessed. This scopophilic approach to Mary Ann, which captures her sexual pleasure, is enunciated at several points in the drama, but nowhere is this more obvious than in the first sex scene with Joseph Nattrass, Mary Ann's lover. Nattrass approaches her under the cover of darkness, and Mary Ann asks 'What do you want?' to which he replies, 'A closer look.' As a stand-in for the audience, Nattrass's request replicates that of the viewer. Another scene with James Robinson's sister reveals how the fictional Mary Ann is complicit in this representation. When Miss Robinson explains she has seen through Mary Ann's sugary attentions to her brother and his children, Mary Ann seizes her hand and thrusts it upon her breast, and between her legs, exclaiming, 'Here's the hold I have on your brother, and here... You are a dried up old virgin.' The demarcation in this scene between the sexually knowledgeable and the innocent uneasily (and perhaps lazily) replays the Madonna-whore dichotomy, but as a point of note, in each of these instances the audience simultaneously *sees* and *does not see*. We do not view the naked body, but rather, one which is mediated through clothing. In several instances, such as Mary Ann straddling the excise man, Quick-Manning, or being pleased in a back street by Nattrass, our experience of her carnality is navigated, not by explicit sex scenes, by the sound of bedsprings, the smell of sex that Mary-Ann's mother identifies when she returns from one of her trysts with Nattrass, her face at the point of climax. In short, she is constructed through absence and partiality, much like her final moments on the gallows, and our ability to 'know and to own' her as an object is ultimately limited.

Mary Ann's body is nonetheless a commodity, and she exploits that sexual currency as it is the one of the few possessions a woman of her social class may turn to profit (the other being her working labour). If Fred Cotton's body was the property of South Hetton Coal Company, Mary Ann's is no less implicated in capitalism. Given that circumventing working-class

poverty is her main objective, the show's focus on the notes and coins of insurance payments, spoons and other material possessions is accompanied by a marketable physical body. It also self-reflexively enunciates the power that Mary Ann has over her audience – her marketability is related to her transgression of supposed Victorian norms: as nurse, mother and wife. In many ways, her contemporary attraction relates to the fact that she is a parody of Victorian womanhood, as one broadside from the nineteenth century demonstrates –

How happy it is that seldom we hear  
Of women poisoning their children so dear;  
In this world below or the bright world above  
A heavenly gift is a true mother's love.  
(‘The Trial, Sentence, & Condemnation of Mary Ann Cotton, the West Auckland  
Poisoner’ n.d.)

This broadside provides a useful comparison to *Dark Angel*, as the focus here is on Cotton's aberrance, her marked departure from conventional gendered behaviour. Her deviant maternity, alongside her pose as a caregiver, also challenges every notion about gendered determinism, and makes her uncomfortable in relation to nineteenth century moral codes. This discomfiting portrayal is also evident in a scene just prior to her abandonment of the child she conceived with James Robinson. Having fled his house following the discovery of her theft of money, Mary Ann walks the streets with a crying child, who evidently needs feeding. In the alcove of a darkened street, Mary Ann breastfeeds her baby. This seeming model of motherhood, however, complicates any notion we may have about Mary Ann at the centre of the Victorian domestic sphere, as she does so publicly and with some frustration, clearly resenting the child and its demands. Importantly, her maternal body has the potential to become a public site of scrutiny (both in the street and among the contemporary viewers). This scrutiny mirrors the media coverage which attended Mary Ann's trial. As Judith Knelman has identified, the baby born to Mary Ann in Durham Gaol and probably fathered by one of Mary Ann's lovers, (the mysterious excise-man by the name of Quick-Manning) prompted among the public a ‘change of feeling against the “monster murderess”’, as it was difficult to reconcile this vision of motherhood with murder, especially for base economic benefit (Knelman 1998, 75). This may go some way to explain the ambiguous maternity of Mary Ann in *Dark Angel*. She oscillates between grief and anxiety for her children (especially for her daughter, Isabella, whom she is shown to poison by accident, despite there

being no historical evidence of this whatsoever), and impatience (various children and stepchildren are chastised and dispatched due to their inconvenience). In response to this child's death, Mary Ann exclaims 'Oh sweet Jesus what have I done?' It seems it was necessary to temper the representation of Mary Ann in *Dark Angel* – she becomes not a cold-blooded killer, but at least on some occasions, simply mistaken.

Relatedly, David Wilson remarks that this 'conceptual impossibility' of the female serial killer is discernible in historical coverage of the trial (Wilson 2013, 164). Newspapers emphasised that 'she was comely-looking and gentle-eyed' and not 'terrible and repulsive,' despite the fact that illustrations of her were composed to make her look more villainous (Wilson 2013, 162). By comparison, J. Holt Schooling identifies Mary Ann in his study, 'Nature's Danger-Signals: A Study of the Faces of Murderers', stating 'The danger signal is shown plainly enough... This wretch poisoned a large number of persons for the sake of petty gains with the unconcern of a farm girl who wrings the necks of poultry. She had thick-looking, dark brown eyes, muddy and hard' (Schooling 1898, 658). Drawing on Cesare Lombroso's (1835-1909) index of criminal types, Schooling has managed to select what appears to be a waxwork of Mary Ann, in order to suggest her inherent, degenerative criminality. These examples clarify why the Mary Ann of *Dark Angel* is such an ambiguous creature, given the competing images in circulation. She is clearly presented as a multiple murderer, but her criminal body is also explicitly maternal, resulting in a category error as to her Victorian femininity: this is apparent in the final scenes at the gaol, where she nurses her newborn baby, Margaret Edith Quick-Manning, before handing her over to adoptive parents. Such a tempered characterisation also participates in the idea of contemporary 'wound culture' where 'criminal corpses [are] to be represented positively after death' (Denham 2016, 234). This goes some way to explain why Mary Ann's final death scene is absent: omitting the ignominious conclusion to her life, struggling at the end of a rope, *Dark Angel* offers instead a version of the feminine body for consumption which participates in the feminine functions of mother, caregiver, and lover, even as Mary Ann transgresses these roles. The criminal body is ultimately predicated on ambiguity, and commodified for viewing pleasure.

### **3) Victims and Corpses: Wound Culture**

This article has already detailed the way in which the visual screening of the corpse is selective and partial. Mary Ann's body in its death throes remains shielded from view, whilst

the maternal and sexual body is both displayed and withheld. However, the representation of the abject corpse in terms of Mary Ann's purported victims (her mother, children, lovers and husbands) explores how the victim's objectified body also becomes a thing of consumption. Death scenes in *Dark Angel* are tempered by the fact that arsenic is coded as a feminine poison: it was still widely available (The Sale of Arsenic Act, 1851 only partly restricted and attempted to monitor the acquisition of the substance); it is also domestic, a household item lurking everywhere in the Victorian home, from toys to wallpapers, and also not requiring physical force to kill. As Whorton says simply, 'over the course of the Victoria era, twice as many women as men were tried on charges of killing their mates with poison... female killers were much more likely to use poison' (Whorton 2010, 34). As such, the blood and gore we might associate with body horror and serial killing is entirely absent here. But the violence associated with crime is nonetheless detectible in the death-scene of Joseph Natrass.

In *Dark Angel*, Natrass is characterised as the taboo love interest of the anti-heroine: Irish-born actor Jonas Armstrong plays this character, with swarthy good looks and an edgy ruggedness which many of Mary Ann's more insipid romantic choices clearly lack. However, this romance plot is less important than Natrass's death scene, which draws heavily on historical accounts at the time of the trial. Under oath, Mary Ann's neighbour Jane Hedley testified as follows:

I assisted during the time of the illness of Joseph Natrass. I saw him several times during his illness. The Prisoner waited on him and was constantly about him. I saw no one else wait on him. The prisoner gave him anything he required. Natrass was several times sick and purged... I saw him have fits, he was very twisted up and seemed in great agony. He twisted his toes & his hands & worked them all ways. He drew his legs quite up. He was throwing himself about a good deal & the Prisoner held him & had to use great force. He was unconscious when in the fits... I was present just at the time of Natrass's death. He died in a fit, which was similar to the previous ones. The Prisoner was holding him down. (Wilson 2013, 89-90).

There are several issues worthy of note in this account. It is apparent that Natrass suffered a great deal during his final hours, and this spectacle is rehearsed in *Dark Angel*, including Mary Ann physically holding him down in his last moments. We see Mary Ann nursing the sick man diligently by his bedside, giving him tea, tending to his seizures and ultimately



‘performing Victorian femininity, whilst in actual fact she was committing murder’ (Wilson 2013, 92). Tellingly though, this traumatised body is a spectacle in way that Mary Ann’s is not, embedded in the notion of wound culture, as Seltzer explains:

the spectacular public representation of violated bodies, across a burgeoning range of official, academic, and media accounts, in fiction and in film, has come to function as a way of imagining and situating our notions of public, social, and collective identity (Seltzer 1998, 21).

[...] the body has insistently become relevant as spectacle or representation – and, most insistently, as spectacle or representation of crisis, disaster, or atrocity. (Seltzer 1998, 35).

So if we are spared Mary Ann’s corpse because of contemporary culture’s desire to represent the murderer in a positive light, Nattrass’s death presents clear anxieties about the nature of femininity, both in the nineteenth century, and the present day. James Whorton correlates the Victorian disquiet about the threat of women poisoning their menfolk to the cultural context of suffrage: ‘At a time when the newly organized feminist movement was agitating for greater social and professional roles for women, challenging traditional male authority, threatening to unleash sexual anarchy, it was all too easy to suppose that the female poisoners who now made such regular appearances in newspaper headlines were a much more numerous species than, in fact, they were’ (Whorton 2010, 34-5). By the same token, an examination of Nattrass’s death scene reveals that his tortured body stands in metonymically for all men who might be at the mercy of evil, demanding women: Mary Ann is quite literally a woman on top, whilst Nattrass’s swaggering masculinity declines into a suffering and rather pitiful sight. In his harrowing bedside scene, he is positioned as the abandoned lover, whereas it is Mary Ann who is dismissive: a clear reversal of traditional gendered romance. He appeals to her saying ‘once you had me, you didn’t want me, did you, love?’ to which Mary Ann replies ‘Here, have a drop more of this tea.’ Nattrass knows what is happening to him, but is utterly disempowered by her. This precarious masculinity is revealed to be fatal: after all, Nattrass’s affection for Mary Ann has ultimately brought about his death. Lying in his coffin, Nattrass is not so much romantic hero as vulnerable corpse, on display and curiously sexualized (his shroud is wrapped around his waist, leaving his chiseled upper torso exposed). Cloaked in darkness, Mary-Ann stands dispassionately by his open coffin, rubbing

some indistinguishable item with a cloth (coins for the corpse's eyes?). Again we have the simultaneous image of everyday object and objectified body, but Nattrass-as-object for the contemporary viewer is also a lesson in sexual politics. If we think about the context of contemporary culture and specifically feminism, we might locate *Dark Angel* in the subsequent backlash culture which has accompanied women's increased access to the public sphere (Faludi 1993). The emboldened toxic masculinity and the visibility of websites like 'The Return of Kings' (which advocates a return to traditional gender roles), might find a mirror in the representation of Nattrass's body as a casualty of women's spite and greed – in short, women who want 'more.' In this context, *Dark Angel's* Mary Ann is in part a warning to twenty-first century men about the dangers of duplicitous women.

### **Conclusion**

The visual spectacle of objects in *Dark Angel* provide an account of how our Neo-Victorian appropriation of the nineteenth century is inseparable from the material culture of the period. Through an analysis informed by 'thing theory', this essay has proposed that Victorian domestic objects in the show (spoons, lace, teapots) extend far beyond their conventional utility, but paradoxically, lack the burden of memory and sentiment, and therefore challenge perceptions of the Victorian period and its culture of mourning. *Dark Angel* initially seems keen to espouse the still-debated notion that Mary Ann was a multiple murderer (Flanders, 2011), and this allows the viewer to engage with graphic representations of the victims' corpses, being part of what Mark Seltzer has identified as wound culture. In dialogue with Neo-Victorian discussions around historical trauma and bearing witness, the spectacle of the abject corpse becomes an agonized site of repetition and re-enactment and also explores how the objectified body becomes a commodity. Whilst Mary Ann's body signifies her sexual availability in pursuit of economic security, her ambiguous maternity opens up the possibility of a paradoxical femininity, summarised in the oxymoron of the epithet 'Dark Angel' – how can a woman be a mother and a killer? The viewer is spared any visualisation of Mary Ann as a criminal corpse, due to the need to pay tribute to the perversely heroic identity of the serial killer. Hence the 'selective memory' associated with such bodies (Denham 2016). *Dark Angel* also provides a critique of the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution, set against the backdrop of the mining communities in the North East, and the trauma these communities experienced. In this way, we are offered a view of Mary Ann as a product of the monstrosity of capitalism. At the same time, Joseph Nattrass presents a curious reversal of romantic tropes, whilst his vulnerable corpse signifies the

aberrant woman's threat to masculinity. Thus *Dark Angel* provides a concerted reflection on how Mary Ann Cotton's legacy has been revisited and navigated through both materiality and material culture.