Dark Angel: Not As Dark As It Should Be

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Dark Angel
Writer Gwyneth Hughes
Director Brian Percival
Centurion Productions, UK 2016 (TV miniseries)
Masterpiece Theater, USA 2017 (TV miniseries)

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The Masterpiece miniseries *Dark Angel* (2016), directed by Brian Percival and written by Gwyneth Hughes, is based on David Wilson's *Mary Ann Cotton: Britain's First Female Serial Killer* (2013). Wilson, a criminology professor at Birmingham City University, uses historical forensic evidence to build a case against Mary Ann ultimately finding her guilty of at least sixteen, possibly seventeen, murders. Wilson views Mary Ann's motivations as "purpose-oriented" as opposed to "pleasure-oriented" in that she was not a sadist as much as a psychopathic opportunist (Wilson 2013: 17). His forensic evidence is convincing. According to historian Judith Flanders,

> I started off firmly believing that Mary Ann Cotton was innocent – that indeed there had been no murders. David Wilson's meticulous research, his eye for detail, his forensic ability to reconstruct the material that survives, and assess the probabilities where gaps remain in the record, opened my eyes. (Flanders qtd. in Wilson 2013: viv)

Wilson's text is designed to determine "if, like more traditionally successful capitalists, Mary Ann simply tried to put her mistakes behind her by killing those that she no longer needed or wanted, and having done so, start again"

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(Wilson 2013: 25). While *Dark Angel* captures the idea of 'starting again' that so obsessed Mary Ann, forensic detective work is entirely absent from the series, even though it is vital to Wilson's text. Unfortunately, as a result, the miniseries too often comes across like a Hallmark Channel original movie about a serial poisoner who also happens, more importantly, to be a Victorian MILF (or 'Mother/Mom/Mama I'd Like to Fuck').

While Wilson places Mary Ann in her "social, economic and cultural context", he is careful to make sure this context is not "meant to excuse, or even champion Mary Ann" (Wilson 2013: 22-23). While *Dark Angel* similarly places Mary Ann Cotton (Joanne Froggat) in her social context as a working-class wife tragically aware of her limitations, there is so much effort made to understand her situation that it forces viewers, if not to identify with Mary Ann, then to at least sympathise with her rotten position. As screenwriter Hughes remarks, "[i]f a modern British woman were to ask Mary Ann what she wanted, I believe she would reply: 'Contraception. Independence. Hot and cold running water'" (Hughes qtd. in Armstrong 2016: n.p.). While this is likely true (though Mary Ann might also add 'money' or 'more arsenic'), a feminist re-visioning of this historical figure proves problematic, because Mary Ann was a highly successful serial killer who moved locations frequently to avoid suspicion and mainly killed children, since "no one was surprised when children, particularly poor children, died young" (Watson 2004: 217). *Dark Angel* paints a vivid picture of Mary Ann's poverty, her perpetual drudgery, and her never-ending fertility that is matchless to anything found in even the most randy of bunny warrens. In other words, the series represents her as a poor woman first, a poisoner second.

After the natural death of her fifth child, and with two living daughters still in tow, Mary Ann once again falls pregnant and starts over again in Sunderland with her useless husband, William Mowbray (Tom Varey), who stupidly claims, upon entering their filth-encrusted, vermin-infested new rooms: "With a little cleaning up, it will be home sweet home in no time" (Percival and Hughes 2016). Meanwhile Mary Ann moans to herself, knowing all too well that her role as 'angel is the house' now makes it her job to turn this festering hovel into nest of familial comfort and joy. It is enough to make anyone a murderer.

The next scene has Mary Ann on her hands and knees (not for sex, but that is coming soon), scrubbing the floor vigorously, then going out

back into a dirty alley filled with other scrubbing women to pump more water for more scrubbing. The scrubbing and hauling repeats until she discovers an infestation of bedbugs on the mattress that forces her to go out and buy arsenic to kill the bugs, before returning to scrub the mattress, warning her daughters to stay out of the room to avoid the poison that covers her bare hands and which she herself breathes in with each laborious sigh from her pert bosom. At some point in the day, she also gives birth – just another chore on her hellish, nonstop list of chores. And still, despite being so beleaguered with work and maternity's constant pressures, Froggat's lustrous hair is barely contained in a rose-coloured scarf, a smudge of dirt artfully placed on her pink cheek; she is more reminiscent of Vivian Lee as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) than a serial killer who boasts a body count several times over Jack the Ripper's (though admittedly many of the bodies were quite small). Instead of menace, an air of plucky spunkiness pervades the scene, which does not reflect that while O'Hara married her way to riches, Mary Ann married *and murdered* her way into better homes and gardens.

As a result, the main conflict, at least in the first part of the series, arises from her intense poverty, and probable postpartum depression, and not her identity as a serial killer. Although poverty has been aestheticized in other neo-Victorian series featuring murder, like *Ripper Street* (2012-16), and can certainly be deemed a contributing factor to criminal behaviour, poverty in itself does not create serial killers. The traits of a true psychopath, such as being a pathological liar, manipulative, remorseless, and incapable of empathy or sincere emotion, are considered a "defect" of the personality that typically manifests before the age of seventeen and not a "mental disorder" (Arntfield 2016: 183). To repeatedly connect poverty with psychopathy does a disservice to all the real-life impoverished Victorian mothers who did not resort to murdering their children because they felt burdened by nappies and colic. While maternal stress might be responsible for a crime committed in a moment or passion or deep depression, it does not accurately reflect Mary Ann's *modus operandi*, i.e. her continuous pattern of calculated, pre-meditated murders. And this focus on her poverty and frequent maternity as the primary motives ultimately does her legacy little justice, because though she was a prolific breeder, she was also a prolific murderer. The series' emphasis on social context, or its laying of a foundation to 'understand' her motivations, confuses the audience's

expectations. Thus, when the heroine starts murdering family members, the action becomes puzzling and occasionally comical, when it really should be chilling.

Mary Ann's motives were indisputably monetary. She took out and cashed in life insurance policies on many of her victims. This is reflected, albeit somewhat excusably, in *Dark Angel* when William returns from his job on a steamship with a broken leg and two empty pockets. Mary Ann complains, "You're no use to us at all" (Percival and Hughes 2016). Then she goes to the kitchen, opens the cupboard, passes over a jar of pickled eggs that look as if they would have poisoned William much faster, and selects the leftover arsenic to add to her husband's tea. Her face is calm as if she has considered this option in a dark recess of her mind for some time now. And with this cold-blooded decision, Mary Ann joins the company of latter-day classic 'noir' femme fatales like Phyllis Dietrichson (also based on real-life murderess Ruth Snyder) in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder's film in 1944; James M. Cain's novel in 1936), who wish to exchange their inadequate husbands for some hard cash. But Mary Ann is denied the villain role yet again in *Dark Angel*. While suffering the terrible effects of arsenic poisoning, Mary Ann solicitously tends William, who, between bouts of heaving out his guts, sings her praises: "You're an angel. I'm just a disappointment" (Percival and Hughes 2016). It is enough to make her reconsider the poisoning, but then he dies before she can right the dire situation. From there, it is a short trip to the Prudential insurance office to collect five pounds in life insurance money. But even in this scene, Mary Ann is not granted the agency of a serial killer and is portrayed solely as a grieving wife and mother. When the life insurance agent informs Mary Ann that John Roberts, her recently deceased child, is also good for two pounds, instead of planting a seed for future crimes (which supposedly it did, since she murdered again and again in order to cash in life insurance policies), Mary Ann sobs and, with a tragic trill in her voice, attempts to turn away "the blood money" (Percival and Hughes 2016). Katherine Watson claims that Mary Ann Cotton was "more akin to a modern psychopath, a person who displays amoral and antisocial behaviour but whose mental 'stability' is controlled" (Watson 2004: 212). If the murderous mind cogs of this Victorian psychopath are whirring, even ever so subtly, viewers cannot see a hint of them through Froggat's weepy baby blues.

Perhaps decorous method plays a role in her portrait as a serial killer. When Mary Ann kills, she does not decapitate, eat, or otherwise molest her victims. Like other nineteenth-century murderesses, such as Amelia Elizabeth Dyer (1837-1896), Hélène Jégado (1803-1852), or Maria Swanenburg (1839-1915), Mary Ann utilises poison and mainly murders family member or those who employ her as a domestic servant. In contrast, depictions of male serial killers, fictional or loosely factual, like Hannibal Lector, Norman Bates, Anton Chigurh, and Sweeney Todd prove mercilessly gruesome and bloody. Meanwhile Mary Ann's murder weapon of choice is a teapot. Her signature pre-kill phrase is "Would you like a nice cup of tea?" (Percival and Hughes 2016), which is repeated over and over, bringing back fonder memories of Froggat as Anna Smith (later Bates), serving Lady Mary with diligent loyalty in *Downtown Abbey* (2010-15). Yet, the uncanniness of such a domestic and quaint weapon should make it all the more unsettling, even if it is not as sensational as human taxidermy, a captive bolt pistol, or Sweeney's tilting barber's chair and razor. The teapot is not without its homey and homicidal charms. In an era where poison has become chic nostalgia, as in the good old days of arsenic and lace and violent diarrhoea, one can find neo-Victorian inspiration in many places, including the 'Toxic Teacup' from the Victorian Trading Company that, once emptied, informs you in elegant calligraphy: "You have been poisoned" (Victorian Trading Co. 2017; see https://www.victoriantradingco.com/item/75-mu-7529785/100101/toxic-teacup--you-have-been-poisoned). It is all part of the Mary Ann Cotton Collection that includes a Twin Roses Tea Strainer, a Tea Caddy box filled with Downton Abbey Holiday Cheer Tea, and Mrs. Patmore's Pudding Blend, and a set of fine sturdy white tea towels to wipe it all up. In fact, the teapot is a rather ingenious weapon for a Victorian murderess. As a symbol of domesticity and femininity, the teapot usually functions as a marker of comfort and rest in Victorian homes. This makes it a particularly effective murder weapon, as it remains hidden even in full view, as unsuspected of any nefarious purposes as a devoted and dutiful-seeming Victorian wife and mother.

In *Dark Angel*, Mary Ann may be a disappointment as a cold-hearted serial killer, but she is shown operating skilfully and inexhaustibly as a seductress and nymphomaniac. Before reading Wilson's text and

determining Mary Ann Cotton to be guilty of her alleged crimes, Flanders commented on the public condemnation Mary Ann received once arrested:

> The trial itself was a forgone conclusion: a working-class woman with no effective legal representation, accused of mass murder among family members. In a replay of earlier poison panic, Mary Ann Cotton was an outsider, sexually promiscuous, with too many children, at least some of whom were maintained by local taxes. (Flanders 2011: 391)

For the Victorian public, her promiscuity was reflected by four husbands, the last married bigamously, and her thirteen children. At first, in the miniseries, Mary Ann's fertility appears a burden to her. Both her mother and stepfather blame Mowbray for getting her pregnant too often, leading to "four little coffins in four years" (Percival and Hughes 2016). However, Mary Ann's sexual drive is formidable; she never spurns her husbands' advances, even when her parents sleep in the adjoining room, painfully aware of the couple's baby-making activities. In fact, when Mary Ann marries her second husband, George Ward (Thomas Howes), and he is unable to perform his conjugal duties or bring home the bacon (unless a few shillings from the parish relief counts), viewers know he is not long for this world. If she can kill a virile though financially unsuccessful husband, it is most definitely going to be 'tea time' for his successor, when he proves both impotent and broke.

This is not to malign a woman's healthy sexual appetite, especially since lust is the least of Mary Ann's vices. However, the miniseries repeatedly highlights her promiscuity in order to titillate viewers, not necessarily to make a stand to defend a woman's right to sexual desire or her choice to be polyamorous. Mary Ann's lasciviousness at times seems calculated, at others times quite beyond her control. When she uses shared grief to seduce her third potential husband, a widower, the handsome and well-to-do James Robinson (Sam Hoare), for whom she works as a nanny, she deploys her sexuality with deft skill. She uses a maternal charm, literally singing him to sleep as she croons a lullaby to his baby, who will soon die of gastric fever. She then manipulates his grief, turning it into lust, and having succeeded in capturing his romantic interest, threatens to leave until he pleads, "I can't face the darkness alone" (Percival and Hughes 2016). She

then climbs the long staircase, her candle a dim beacon in the darkness, and he follows her like a man hypnotised, unaware of the darkness she will bring to his entire household. However, James's sister, Helen (Emma Fielding), does recognise Mary Ann as a temptress and calls her out privately. Mary Ann informs her that she knows what a man wants, hissing, "Here's the hold I have on your brother" (Percival and Hughes 2016). She then grabs Helen's hand and forces her to touch her breast before bringing her hand down to her groin. This may simply be another instance of neo-Victorian writers and filmmakers using sexuality to overturn audiences' stereotypical expectations of Victorian 'repression', a tactic used to great effect in the *Penny Dreadful* series (2014-2016), for instance, albeit in the latter case based on fictional characters as opposed to true-crime murderesses. Yet this same tactic also reveals that Mary Ann's only real sense of power comes from being able to control men sexually, as well as a compulsion to vindictively point out this fact to 'frigid' or less attractive women like Helen. Hence to some extent, the series seems to endorse a reductive and essentialising, indeed reactionary view of female sexuality.

Mary Ann's unwavering confidence that a man can be governed by his libidinous appetites is proven correct again and again. When she visits her friend, Maggie Cotton (Laura Morgan), who has been caring for her widower brother, Fred (Mark Underwood), and his children, for instance, Mary Ann warns her that Fred will eventually want a sexual partner, not a sister, to care for his needs. She illustrates her point by reaching across a sleepy Fred to stoke the fire, letting her shirt graze his legs while his eyes muse on her pretty features lit by the dancing flames. When she returns to her seat next to Maggie, she says, "See, first sniff of skirt and he'll be off" (Percival and Hughes 2016). She uses sex rather explicitly to attempt to seduce another boss, John Quick-Manning (Ferdy Roberts), into marriage. Although this seduction does not bear any fruit, except in her womb, viewers are still treated to a sample of the type of nursing Mary Ann uses for her single male patients-of-means: "Slowly, slowly", she instructs, as she rides him on the parlour couch (Percival and Hughes 2016), a treatment that both seem to enjoy equally. Again, this affords Mary Ann sexual agency, but it fails to show her as a highly efficient and shrewd psychopath.

In *Dark Angel*, the portrayal of Mary Ann's on-again-off-again relationship with Joe Nattras (Jonas Armstrong) comes across, at times, like a love story, making viewers question whether, if she had met Nattras

before Mowbray, she would still have become a serial killer. The chemistry between Froggat and Armstrong is convincing. Mary Ann, supposedly a narcissistic psychopath, appears genuinely enamoured with Joe, who brings out if not her soft side, then at least a contemplative one. They first meet when she is still married to Mowbray, purchasing arsenic for the bedbugs; however, this does not stop Joe from stalking his prey. "I'll not hurt you", he says (Hughes 2016), coming into her communal laundry room one dark night, a shadow from the alley, who pulls up her dress and pleasures her manually, causing her to orgasm intensely in less time than it would take to add cream to a cup of tea. From that point on, the two cannot keep their hands off each other – from trysts under the boardwalk to rowdy sessions in a stranger's bed. Froggat plays Mary Ann as a woman who is always keen, even reliant, on a man's attention to satisfy her own libido, or to marry (and insure and kill), or sometimes both. However, the love with Joe goes deeper than physical satiety as she shares with him her inner thoughts, more so than with any other character. In a scene showing the lovers sprawled on a blanket in the forest, pre-coital, post-coital, or pre-coital again, Mary Ann articulates her thoughts on marriage: "It's nothing but husbands and children and slavery" (Percival and Hughes 2016). She just fails to add, 'but I've discovered a really effective loophole'. Her frustration with a woman's station, along with the bucolic romance of the setting, end up falling flat, because ultimately this is a story about a woman who likely killed four men, two women, and ten children.

The miniseries proves most captivating when it gives in completely to Gothic horror. Froggat, whose prettiness and tearfulness generally keep her from appearing a proper villain, only becomes the monster Mary Ann Cotton likely was in scenes that feature children. When she is working toward marriage with James Robinson and he begins to get cold feet, Mary Ann shouts, "You're letting your children stand in the way of our happiness" (Percival and Hughes 2016). She then decides to eliminate three of his children, and consequently one of her own, Isabella, albeit accidently, to clear the way for marriage. She creeps into the darkened nursery with her teapot and tea tray, looming menacingly over the sleeping children, who are soon to be her next victims. Similarly, after her marriage to James, Mary Ann bonds with James's son, William (George Kent), the only one to comfort her when she mourns her daughter, Isabella, at the gravesite. The boy, who has lost several family members, including his mother, is eager to

please his new stepmother, basking in her praises when he pawns jewellery and other items for her, including his own dead mother's lace. When James confronts Mary Ann about the pawn shop and her theft of fifty pounds from his own account, she apologises to James, then vents her rage on William by turning on him viciously when the two are alone. "Sneak, sneak", she shouts with real venom, the ultimate evil stepmother, as William weeps at the betrayal. Little does he know that he is one of the lucky ones. In contrast, Fred's son, the vulnerable Charlie Cotton (Jake Lawson), with no blood ties to Mary Ann and no other adults to keep her in check, is not spared. She is cold to him and does not feed him, neglecting him until he looks like a street urchin straight out of a Dickens novel. And when she tries and fails to foist him off on the workhouse, she decides to rid herself of the burden by poisoning him. It is Charlie's death that causes enough suspicion for an autopsy, which also eventually leads to her arrest and the exhumation of her other victims. The victimisation of children, often linked with paedophilia, is in no way limited to neo-Victorian television dramas, but instead reflects a contemporary obsession with child murders that can be seen all over television programming, as in *Broadchurch* (2013-2017), *The Killing* (2011-2014), *True Detective* (2014–), *Top of the Lake* (2017), and numerous spin-offs and episodes of *Law and Order* (1990–). However, the protagonist in most cases is the detective, who searches for the murderer and represents justice, whereas *Dark Angel's* main character attempts to be both protagonist and antagonist. Hence the series too often feels as if the filmmakers had not fully thought through different options for point of view.

The murder of the protagonist's mother contains elements of horror fitting to the portrait of a serial killer. Mary Ann is called away from her seduction of James in order to care for her ailing mother. Angry and resentful, like a vampire interrupted in its feed, she has no intention of spending weeks caring for her sickly parent, Margaret Stott (Penny Laydon), and thereby risk losing her next, and best, meal ticket. Within days, she offers her mother "a nice cup of tea", to which Margaret presciently responds, "There's a darkness in you, Mary Ann" (Percival and Hughes 2016). The dramatic cut from the tea table to her mother's coffin, pennies closing her eyes, highlights the dramatic shift in tone in the miniseries. The beleaguered housewife, the destitute laundress, the carefree girl who celebrates freedom after her first husband's death by capering on

the beach, cheeks aglow, taking off her bonnet to let her long locks blow in the salty air, has finally fulfilled her destiny as a believable psychopath, ruthlessly seizing every opportunity and destroying anyone who stands in her way of a "fresh start" (Percival and Hughes 2016).

In some ways, *Dark Angel* is guilty of creating a heroine when Mary Ann Cotton should be a villain. Although the current interest in nineteenth-century female killers can also be scene in the recent adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) for Netflix, written by Sarah Polley and directed by Mary Harron, it will be interesting to discover how Grace Marks's murderous inclinations will be represented. Unfortunately, the lesson that infanticide cannot be sexy is learned too late in *Dark Angel*, although when the shift does occur, Froggat proves up to the challenge, displaying an impassivity that passes as a psychotic lack of empathy, then blows up in episodes of blatant cruelty to her most vulnerable victims. However, the emphasis on repressive Victorian domesticity combined with poverty and over-the-top sexual pandering does not make for a feminist or even classist re-imagining of Mary Ann Cotton's life. While recurrent images of churches and gravesites, weddings, baptisms, and funerals demonstrate the continuous cycles of Mary Ann's existence as a wife and mother, they fail to provide gravitas to the crimes she committed against those more vulnerable than herself. As a result, the last word of this review will come from one of the few historical documents that survive as her legacy, a nursery rhyme sung by children: "Mary Ann Cotton/ She's dead and she's rotten. […] Mary Ann Cotton is tied up with string./ Where, where?/ Up in the air, Selling black puddens a penny a pair" (qtd. in Flanders 2011: 394).

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