

‘Wonderfully cruel proceedings’: The Murderous Case of James Yates

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Abstract: In 1781, James Yates, a farmer in upstate New York, brutally murdered his family while suffering from a “religious delusion.” Fifteen years later, in 1796, *The New York Weekly Magazine* published an anonymously authored account of this episode, which in turn inspired Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Wieland*. Previously unexamined newspaper reports of the original massacre uniformly link Yates’s violence to his religious identity as a Shaker. Shakerism’s emphasis on gender equality and rejection of patriarchal familial structures prefigured, in many ways, the republican ideological investment in women (particularly mothers) as repositories of virtue; thus, Yates’s crime can be understood as an early manifestation of a broader “crisis of masculinity” in the period. The 1796 account makes no mention of Yates’s Shakerism, but nevertheless participates in discourses of gender and nationhood; it memorializes the female victims, containing Yates’s “treasonous” violence against the family within an orderly narrative that privileges female heroism.

Keywords: Familicide; James Yates; *Wieland*; Charles Brockden Brown; Shakers; *New York Weekly Magazine*; Republican Mother

Résumé

Mots clés

Mention the name James Yates to a scholar of early American culture, and you may elicit a flicker of recognition. The story of his crime provides a footnote to one of the most important works of early American fiction—Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, published in 1798. From its first publication, the critical consensus has been

that Brown took the broad outline of this dark tale—the story of a man who murders his family under the influence of a religious delusion—from an account of a real familicide that had occurred in the rural settlement of Tomhanick, near Albany in upstate New York, in 1781. Brown himself hinted as much in the “Advertisement” for the novel, when he pre-empted criticism of its implausibility by declaring that “most readers will recollect an authentic case, remarkably similar to that of *Wieland*” (3). Brown did not, of course, expect readers in 1798 to recall the details of a crime committed in a remote rural area, some seventeen years earlier, in the midst of the Revolution. However, in 1796, the *New York Weekly Magazine* printed a short, anonymously authored narrative entitled “An Account of the Murder of Mr J——Y——, upon his family, in December, A.D. 1781,” shortly before Brown began work on *Wieland*; it was this text that Brown was confident his readers would remember, and that he certainly used when composing his novel.¹

Until recently, however, very little attention has been given to this account in its own right, or to the reporting of the original crime in contemporary newspapers. In the light of several newly discovered accounts of the original Yates murders, I will argue here that while there are reasons to doubt the absolute accuracy of the 1796 account, there are other details to suggest that it was derived from first-hand knowledge or an original source; that it can be related to the strain of anti-Shaker writings of the time; and that it can, and should, be read as a complex, self-consciously literary piece that actively participates in the contemporary discourse on gender and nationhood in the new republic of the 1790s.

I

Daniel E. Williams has argued in a recent article that critical assumptions of the reliability of the 1796 Yates account are deeply flawed, and that “[t]he facts that

Brown reworked into his fiction are quite possibly fictions, and it is possible that the Yates account was modeled after, or at least strongly influenced by, an entirely different source ... ” (644). Williams’s “different source” refers to a series of events that occurred approximately a year after Yates murdered his family, in a similar small town not too far away. In December 1782, William Beadle, a struggling merchant in Wetherfield, Connecticut, calmly and rationally slaughtered his wife and four children with an axe, before inserting a pistol in each of his ears and blowing out his own brains. The crime left a significant mark in textual records, occasioning a steady stream of publications that included copious newspaper articles and two long published sermons. The second of these included, as an appendix, an account of the discovery of the crime scene by Stephen Mix Mitchell. Mitchell later expanded this to include a biographical account of Beadle himself, alongside some of the written material the murderer left behind, in which he justified his actions according to his Deist religious beliefs. Mitchell’s narrative outstripped the sermons in popularity, and was reprinted independently several times over the next fifteen years, even being translated into German in 1796. The 1796 Yates narrative certainly bears some marked resemblances to Mitchell’s account.

Williams bases much of his argument on the assertion that “[a]side from the original brief mention of the Yates family murder inserted in a few scattered newspapers, no other reported facts have been found” (649–50), correctly pointing out that the initial reporting of the murders was surprisingly brief. On 27 December 1781, *The Massachusetts Spy*, the *Salem Gazette*, and *The Norwich Packet and Weekly Advertiser* all carried the same brief news item: “A few days since one James Yates, who says he was born in West Chester county, was committed to Albany gaol, for the wilful murder of his wife and four children; he also killed his cattle.” However, a

number of New England newspapers *did* print a slightly amplified account in mid-February 1782, which described Yates as “formerly of West Chester county, one of the Society of Shakers in that Neighbourhood.” The blame for the murders is firmly laid at the door of his peculiar separatist faith: “It seems this unfortunate Man was tempted to this horrid Deed by the Spirit which so manifestly actuates the whole Society.”² This crucial detail is reiterated by another, still more detailed report that appeared in several newspapers at almost the same time.³ It is an account that has never really been discussed by scholars, and it contains some minor but telling discrepancies with the more well-known 1796 account.⁴

The “correspondent” who provided these details is said to have heard them on 5 November, “at Pitts-Town, in Albany county, state of New York, in the neighbourhood where it happened.” This suggests that the murders were committed either in October or, possibly, early November, rather than in December as the 1796 account claims, lending further support to the notion that the later Yates narrative draws heavily on Mitchell’s text, as Beadle certainly did kill his family in December. Yates is once again described as “one of the society of Shakers,” and it is confirmed that his transformation from normality to murderous insanity was sudden and unforeseen; we are told that his character was “an insignificant one.” After killing his family early in the morning, Yates apparently “ran naked about a half a mile to the house of his father and mother” to confess his crime, and it was his “ancient” parents who, despite their initial disbelief, discovered the truth of his claims. Only the mother and her infant child appear to have been killed outside the house, and the murder weapon, a club, was apparently the same for each member of the family—though an axe was discovered inside one of the two cows he is also said to have killed, together with two horses and his dog. When Yates was shown the bodies of his murdered

family, the report continues, “he said they were not his wife and children, but the woman was an Indian squaw.” This denial of his wife’s identity suggests not only the dislocation of Yates’s sense of reality, but also the extent to which his family had become alien to him—his mutilated wife appearing in his eyes as a racial “other.” Perhaps most intriguing is the detail that Yates is not even “bound” in the immediate aftermath of the murders, on the strength of his brother’s promise to “prevent his doing any further mischief.” Compared to the public outcry over the Beadle murders, this fact is nothing short of astounding.⁵

Yates’s documentary trail doesn’t quite end there, however. Seven years later, in early January 1789, as the nation was gripped with excitement over the new Constitution, the *Salem Mercury* printed a small news item underneath a list of the Federal Representatives and Electors for Connecticut:

Among other petitions which have been presented to the Assembly of New York during their present session, is one from James Yates, prisoner in Albany jail (who, in a fit of insanity, seven years ago, killed his wife and four children, and was therefore sentenced to imprisonment during life) praying to be liberated from confinement, [which] was read, and, on motion, ordered to lie on table.⁶

And with that, as far as I can tell, Yates really does disappear from the historical record, languishing in Albany jail, and yet sufficiently sane (or well-connected) to petition for his release.

II

One of the striking elements of these newly discovered newspaper accounts is their unanimously expressed belief that Yates murdered his family because he was a Shaker. This repositions the Yates reports as crucial documents not only in the pre-history of one of the most important early American novels, but in the history of

Shakerism in the United States. Much has been written about Brockden Brown's religious influences and their manifestation in *Wieland*, but Shakerism has not been mentioned, an omission that certainly needs correcting.⁷

Although the "Shaking Quakers" had only recently arrived in the United States, it is entirely feasible that James Yates may have been one of the earliest converts to their faith. The founder of the Shaker religion, Ann Lee, had arrived in New York in 1774, accompanied by seven followers. According to historian Stephen J. Stein, the first settlement of Shakers was established on "a tract of land several miles northwest of Albany in the manor of Rensselaerwyck." Stein continues: "Some may have arrived as early as 1776, but firm evidence for Shaker landholdings is not available until 1779 Only after 1779 do the activities of the Shakers begin to surface in contemporary records" (7-8).

Clearly, then, Yates and his family lived in precisely the right neighborhood to come into contact with the Shakers at the earliest possible opportunity, and the newspaper reports of the killings are among the earliest documentary evidence of Shaker activity in the United States. Even at this early period in their "mission," however, the Shakers had aroused a good deal of suspicion and resentment from their neighbors, even as their beliefs and lifestyle attracted a considerable number of converts. In July 1780, just a few months before the murders, three prominent Shakers were imprisoned because of their refusal to bear arms in the Revolutionary cause. As Stein notes, the commission charged with "detecting and defeating Conspiracies" in the state of New York characterized the Shakers as "highly pernicious and of destructive tendency to the Freedom & Independence of the United States of America" (qtd. in Stein 13).

In early 1782, the same newspapers that were carrying reports of the Yates murders were also advertising the sale of the first lengthy accounts of the Shaker communities,

one written by Valentine Rathbun and another by Amos Taylor.⁸ Both Rathbun and Taylor offer “apostate” accounts, having briefly become members of the Niskeyuna settlement near Albany, and are conspicuously hostile to Shaker practices. Several of these alleged practices, summarized by Stein, find echoes in the Yates narratives: [T]he necessity for public confession to the leaders, the condemnation of marriage as sinful, the possibility of communication with angels and spirits, the notion that a judgement of the world was under way, the idea of progress through degrees of punishment, and the concepts of immortality and immunity to suffering and temptation. (16)

Furthermore, other early apostate accounts “charged the Shakers with using alcohol excessively, dancing naked, exorcising demons, burning books, and destroying other objects of value” (31).

However, mistrust of the newly arrived Shaker communities did not wholly derive from their reluctance to support the Revolutionary struggle or from their unconventional, ecstatic form of worship; there was another, equally important reason for the antagonism they encountered. Shaker belief was distinguished from that of other sects by several notable peculiarities, most notably its emphasis on celibacy. Shakers also included women in leadership positions: as Susan De Wolfe has explained, “Shakers believe that God incorporates both masculine and feminine characteristics. From this belief arises the Shaker ideal of gender equality and the Shaker practice of parallel male and female leadership positions” (3).⁹

Moreover, in Shaker communities, “[a]ll property was shared and biological kinship relations were abandoned in favor of the communitywide family of brothers and sisters” (3). Shakerism offered an alternative social model to that which existed in the United States during the Revolution and early republic, and as De Wolfe notes, “the

unifying theme of anti-Shaker writings was that Shakerism represented a dangerous variation on the patriarchal nation, proper American family, and traditional Protestant faith” (10).

Alan Axelrod has argued that both the 1796 Yates account (which he takes to be a reliable) and Brockden Brown’s reworking of it in *Wieland*, “dramatically manifest the complex effects of New World extremity” (55), and that “Yates’s act, like Theodore Wieland’s, was born of that world, a wilderness isolated from the emotionally and intellectually tempering influence of city civilization and organized religion” (57). The assumption implicit in Axelrod’s argument is that both narratives partake of a cultural anxiety relating to the conditions of the new nation—the separation of the wilderness from the city mirrors the separation of the United States from Great Britain, and this partly accounts for the transformation of an “affectionate” family man into a brutal, “unnatural” killer. Shirley Samuels, I think, is much closer to the mark when she suggests that Yates’s self-justification is “reminiscent of Puritan iconoclasm,” and that “he has not so much incorporated the threat of the Indians as violently externalized the closely linked internal problems of belief and the family” (58). These “internal problems” are inherent in Yates’s Shakerism, made so prominent in the original newspaper reports. By highlighting this specific form of belief, the reports associate his actions not only with excessive religious zeal, but with treasonous, suspiciously European opposition to “Freedom and Independence.” They also tap directly into the anti-Shaker sentiment that emerged locally (particularly in print), in direct proportion to the growing influence and success of the Shaker community.¹⁰

Even in the rather bare newspaper accounts of 1781, we can glimpse, in James Yates, a man struggling not with the conditions of a frontier life in which he lacked spiritual

direction, but with a new, clearly-defined set of social and spiritual imperatives that undermined all of his culturally inherited notions of who and what he was, as a father and husband. He now belonged to a faith and a community which denied him his traditional patriarchal position as head of his household, while his sense of attraction to and affection for his wife and children would have been denounced as ungodly. One Shaker apostate, Daniel Rathbun,¹¹ described in his 1785 account how, when he was part of the Shaker community, “my wife and children were all dead to me” (qtd in De Wolfe, 13–4). And yet the message of Shakerism, with regard to family and marriage, was somewhat contradictory—Shaker converts like Yates, who were already married with children, could not simply renounce their families if the latter did not share their new religious enthusiasm; one of the conditions of entry into the community was that a husband had to provide for his wife. Yates would therefore have had both spiritual and financial imperatives for his actions. By killing his family, he was simultaneously casting off the carnal trappings of his sinful, pre-Shaker life, and “providing” for them, ensuring that they would not want in his absence. For the writers and readers of the earliest newspaper reports of the atrocity, Yates was the Shaker bogeyman come to life, the fulfillment of various intersecting political, social, and religious anxieties. The threat to traditional patterns of family life represented by Shaker practices had found its inevitable physical expression in the literal decimation of an entire family. The fate of the Yates family embodies the way in which, for many Revolutionary writers, the family had become a figure for the nation; to attack one was to attack both. Familicide was tantamount to treason, and in the rhetoric of the Revolutionary period, nothing could be more monstrous than such a betrayal—Benedict Arnold, for instance, the most famous traitor in American history, was routinely transformed by contemporary rhetoric into a monster. However, in the

case of the Yates murders, the transformation was felt to be more than metaphorical. The poet Ann Eliza Bleecker, a neighbor of Yates in Tomhanick, wrote to her sister Susan Ten Eyck in March 1782 to describe a “monster birth” that she believed to be a direct consequence of Yates’s homicidal rampage: “... poor Mrs F—— was lately delivered of a child who is a terror to everyone that sees it. It seems she was struck with so much horror at the sight of JAMES YATES’s murdered family, that it made too fatal an impression” (160–1). The perceived link between the two events emphasizes the fact that the attack on one family had implications beyond those of the crime itself, horrific though it was. It had the potential to taint a new generation of Americans with disloyalty and treason, to “make them monstrous” in a literal sense. In many ways, the hostile reception afforded the earliest Shaker communities foreshadowed many of the anxieties of the early republic over the prominence of the family within the community, and the respective importance of men and women in this ideologically crucial social unit. This overlap may account for the decision by the anonymous author of the 1796 *New York Weekly Magazine* account to revisit the bloody events of late 1781 some fifteen years later.

III

It is tempting to focus on the discrepancies between this account and the original reports as evidence that its author was simply embellishing some very basic or half-remembered facts, or appropriating details from another source, such as the Beadle narrative. It should be stressed that *The New York Weekly Magazine*, in which the account appeared, was not a newspaper, nor did it have any pretensions to journalistic objectivity or accuracy. The avowed intention of *The New York Weekly Magazine* was literary and didactic, as its subtitle proudly declares: “Forming an Interesting Collection of Original and Select Literary Productions, in Prose and Verse, Calculated

for Instruction and Rational Entertainment—the Promotion of Moral and Useful Knowledge—and to Enlarge and Correct the Understandings of Youth.”¹⁰ The original readers of the account, then, would have been alert to its fictional status, and would have expected to encounter both literary artifice and overt moralizing.

The account is prefaced by a short introductory letter from a woman identified only as “Anna,” who apparently sent the account to the editors of the magazine, “at the particular request of a friend, who is well acquainted with the circumstances that gave rise to it.” Furthermore, she pointedly tells us that the narrative has been “drawn up by a female hand,” and that Yates had been “an occasional visitant” in her father’s family. “Anna” makes one further remark, that “as she has no reason to suppose that this transaction has ever appeared in print, you will be pleased to give it a place among your original compositions.”¹¹ This comment implies two things: that Anna, and presumably the author, has written this with no knowledge of existing textual sources; and that it is intended to be read as a literary text—an “original composition.” This confused claim to both authoritative knowledge and creative originality suggests the narrative’s hybridity, its combination of fact and fiction.

However, this reflexive claim to authenticity is characteristic of much eighteenth-century fiction from Defoe onwards. The authorial pose as a mediating “editor,” “friend,” or “translator” of the actual author was a tried and tested literary device, particularly of the epistolary form popularized by British author Samuel Richardson, the foremost model for authors of sentimental fiction in early America. The prefatory material to this account, then, while it appears to indicate a *genuine* knowledge of the events described, also signals the author’s awareness of generic conventions.

All mention of Yates being a Shaker has been effaced from the 1796 account, and yet there are certain details that have no correlative in the Beadle narrative and that also

appeared in the published hostile accounts of Shaker ritual: the book burning; the destruction of objects of value; the communion with spirits. While it must remain speculation, it seems possible that its author did indeed have some recollection of the events, albeit vague, but that she has deliberately chosen to disguise or alter certain details (such as Yates's Shakerism) that were stressed in the original reports, and has recast the story in order for it to have a meaning and a message aimed specifically at her contemporary readership in 1796. The link with the Beadle narrative may be one such change: the author ignores the opportunity to cultivate anti-Shaker feeling (less of an issue for her mid-1790s New York readers), but by borrowing details from the Beadle account, she infuses the story with trace elements of anti-Deism that would have been more meaningful to an audience steeped in the controversy over Deism that had been sparked by Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*.¹²

Yates, we are told, "belonged to one of the most respectable families in this state."¹³ The narrator goes on to tell us, somewhat contradictorily, that he lived "very comfortably," though he was "not in the most affluent circumstances" to maintain his reasonably large family. The bulk of the narrative is told in the first person, apparently taken down upon examination from Yates himself. On a Sunday evening, after some friends who had come to read psalms and sing had departed, he sat reading the Bible by the fire with his wife, their infant daughter on her lap, and their eleven-year-old daughter Rebecca; the two sons were in bed. Yates recounts how "Instantly a new light shone into the room, and upon looking up I beheld two Spirits, one at my right hand and the other at my left;—he the left bade me destroy all my *idols*, and begin by casting the Bible into the fire." Rushing out of the house, Yates grabbed an axe and demolished his sleigh, then killed one of his horses. Returning to the house, urged on

by “the good angel whom I had obeyed,” he murdered his two sons by throwing and “dashing” them against the wall.

Yates then pursued his fleeing wife, threw the axe at her, and wounded her in the hip, causing her to drop the baby, which he picked up and hurled against a fence. Tracking his wife’s bloody trail through the snow, he caught up to her, and after a moment’s vacillation in which his “*natural feelings*” are said to have revived, he was upbraided by the voice reminding him, “That is also an idol!”: “I broke from her instantly, and wrenching a stake from the garden fence, with one stroke levelled her to the earth! And lest she should only be stunned, and might, perhaps, recover again, I repeated my blows, till I could not distinguish one feature of her face!!!”

Finally Yates pursued his eldest daughter, finding her hiding in a haystack. Briefly moved, once again, by her pleas, Yates asked his daughter to sing and dance for him, which she did; but then changing his mind, “and catching up a hatchet that stuck in a log, with one well aimed stroke cleft her forehead in twain.” He then headed over to his sister’s house. She was there alone, her husband having been called away. Despite his violent intentions, his sister succeeded in restraining him and tied him to a bedpost, before setting out to investigate, discovering the scene of the slaughter, and raising the alarm.

The narrative ends with a brief, curious episode describing how Yates was taken to the house of a neighbor, Mrs Bl——er,¹⁴ where he constantly prostrated himself and addressed the unspecific “Father” who commanded him to do what he did. “Mrs Bl——er” asked him who this father was: “he made no reply—but pushing away the person who stood between her and himself, darted at her a look of such indignation as thrilled horror to her heart.” The account is finally lent an air of authority by the narrator’s claim that she visited Yates in prison, in the company of a young girl, to

deliver some fruit, and ends with an acknowledgement of the totally unfathomable nature of these events.

IV

In the print culture of the early United States, brutally violent attacks on families were nothing new. Narratives of Indian captivity had been amongst the most popular forms of indigenous literary production for more than a century. Many of the earliest such accounts were authored by Puritans and offered a Providential interpretation of captivity, torture, and death that sought to impart meaning to the apparent randomness of violence. By the latter end of the eighteenth century, however, the genre had become increasingly lurid and sensational, its spiritual content cloaking its voyeuristic fascination with suffering and distress, as authors absorbed the more hysterical conventions of sentimental fiction. Of equal note was the growing appetite for sensational accounts of crimes—particularly murder—reported in the press. Karen Halttunen has remarked on the shift from “the execution sermon as the dominant literary form of response to murder, towards a more secular narrative account,” which “organized the popular response to murder within a set of narrative conventions that are most usefully characterized as Gothic” (2–3). The Yates narrative of 1796 seems to straddle these genres. Despite its pronounced spiritual subtext, it possesses the sense of bewilderment in the face of unaccountable evil that was the hallmark of the new secular literature of crime, while its unflinching account of the slaughter of a family borrows heavily from the language and tone of contemporary captivity narratives.

The analogy with Indian captivity narratives apparently occurred to Yates himself, who briefly considered disguising his handiwork as an Indian raid: “I will put all the dead in the house together, and after setting fire to it, run to my sister’s and say the

Indians have done it.” He finally rejects this ploy because he believes he has done nothing wrong, and that he was obeying a divine command. This passage recalls a comparable detail from the earlier newspaper account, but with a small change. In the earlier version, we are told that Yates insisted that his murdered wife was actually an Indian squaw; it is not the violence which he “Indianizes,” but the victim. During the Revolution, this would have recalled the familiar loyalist argument that separation from the mother country would entail degeneration into savagery, the gradual elision of Anglo-American and Native identity that Yates’s violent assault has somehow accelerated. Yates’s misperception was a further slight on the sanctity of American womanhood, a further indicator of his separation from his patriotic community.

Jared Gardner has pointed out that, in the early republic, nationalist discourses were characterized by what he calls a “fantasy of sameness,” in which the nation is depicted as a homogenous “imagined community,” and that this fantasy depended on a related racist discourse characterized by “the negative definition of the other.” As he puts it, “the pressing need to imagine a sameness—a community after the Revolution—was always bound to the need to define a difference—from former colonial oppressors abroad and from racial ‘others’ at home” (10). With this in mind, the slight change made in the story makes sense. With the label of “Shaker” removed from the narrative, Yates had no markers of “otherness”—he was a white man, a Christian, and a farmer, in many ways just the sort of yeoman farmer that Jefferson would argue should form the cornerstone of the new republic. By directing his violence onto the family, he denies his “natural feelings” and becomes monstrous—and the narrative marks this explicitly by associating his actions with a racially coded enemy.

In Revolutionary discourse, the idea of “natural” familial behavior, in which the transgressor is rendered monstrous by failure to observe parental (or filial) responsibility, was commonly invoked for political capital by both loyalists and patriots. Loyalists cast Britain in the role of the overly indulgent parent, with America as the recalcitrant, ungrateful child, whereas, in turn, Thomas Paine claimed in *Common Sense* that “the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty” had fled to America, “not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster” (84). The different constructions placed upon this ubiquitous metaphor in the years leading up to and during the Revolution reflect the changing domestic paradigm of the late eighteenth century, and the breakdown of traditional patriarchal authority. The American insistence, during the Revolution, on the rights of “the child,” destabilized efforts to establish new forms of authority once independence had been successfully achieved, in an environment in which conventional repositories of power—aristocracy, monarchy, a centralized church affiliated with the state—had been undermined.

The perceived threat to civic order and public virtue from the absence of political authority in the early republic was countered with a very specific ideological elevation of chaste, angelic American womanhood—what came to be known as the cult of the Republican Mother.¹⁵ Benjamin Rush had written to John Adams in 1780, to express his opinion that the strength of republican values was primarily located in the domestic virtues of American women: “The women of America have at last become principals in the glorious American controversy. Their opinions alone and their transcendent influence in society and families must lead us on to success and victory” (1: 253). Moreover, it was not only wives and mothers who were coming to exert more power in American households, but also children, as the “traditional patriarchal

family” came to be replaced by what Halttunen has termed “the modern sentimental family” (135).

The 1780s and 1790s undoubtedly witnessed some significant changes in the domestic ideology of the young nation. Some were the culmination of a gradual process of change that had been developing throughout the eighteenth century; some were a direct result of the Revolution, some were the product of the emerging market economy in the early republic; but all contributed to what Elizabeth Barnes has recently termed “a time of particular crisis in the history of American masculinity” (47). Familicide has been described as “a peculiarly male crime” (Wilson, Daly, Daniele, 286) and it is easy to see Yates’s destruction of his family as a flailing attempt to reassert patriarchal masculinity in the face of changing domestic conventions and social codes. Indeed, Barnes argues that “familicide perpetrators sought to exemplify manhood by asserting absolute sovereignty over their wives and children”(47).¹⁶ This statement, of course, is complicated by the peculiar demands of Shaker practice, which were as much about relinquishing sovereignty as about asserting it. However, the question remains as to why the anonymous female author, some fifteen years after the fact, would want to retell the story of such a vicious attack on a woman and her children. The answer, I think, lies in the way this narrative has been skillfully constructed to suggest that masculine aggression can be restrained and contained by female agency.

Women are clearly given a more important role in this version of the narrative. While the boys remain anonymous, each female family member is named: Elizabeth, Rebecca, Diana, and Nelly—wife, daughters, and sister, respectively. The names of his wife and daughters are all associated with motherhood, chastity, or both. If Yates thought he was another Abraham demonstrating his faith by sacrificing his loved

ones, then Rebecca is an appropriate name. In Genesis, Rebecca marries Abraham's son Isaac, and it is made clear that she replaces Isaac's mother, Sarah, in his (and perhaps in Abraham's) affections. Moreover, Rebecca is instrumental in determining the fate of the Jewish people, as she directs Isaac's estate towards her favorite son, Jacob, at the end of his father's life. In the only direct utterance from God to a woman in the Old Testament, he tells Rebecca: "Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; And the one people shall be stronger than the other people; And the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). In the early national context of the Yates narrative, the murder of the new Rebecca precludes the possibility of the matriarch being replaced by another, and pre-empted the maternal allocation of power. These verses are obviously about the difficulties that encounter a young nation, and the often arbitrary division of power. Rebecca was a prototype of the powerful mother in the Bible; Yates, just as he destroys his Bible, destroys Rebecca's modern day equivalent, in an attempt to interrupt the transfer of power from the old generation to the new, and the masculine to the feminine.

Diana is another symbol of powerful, independent, virtuous, compassionate womanhood as the Roman goddess of childbirth and chastity and the protector of children. In this context, it seems like a deliberate piece of irony to so name the murdered baby. Elizabeth is another female icon—perhaps alluding to the famously chaste queen of England, or to the Biblical mother of John the Baptist. The Hebrew translation of the name is "consecrated to God," and in a narrative so alive with Biblical parallels and subtexts, it seems to underline the insistent point that Yates is transgressing God's will. Samuels points out that religious "infidelity" (particularly Deism) was often linked in this period with marital infidelity and "illicit sexual desire" (48–9). The coded association of Yates's wife and daughters with iconic

female chastity ensures that they remain untainted by the infidelity of Yates's religious misapprehensions.

The killings of his wife and eldest daughter are clearly problematic for Yates, and hence more sadistically prolonged and cruel: "[M]y heart bled to see her distress, and all my *natural feelings* began to revive; I forgot my duty, so powerfully did her moanings and pleadings affect me." In killing women, it seems, he oscillates between "*natural feelings*" (italics in the original) and an extreme, brutal violence. The attempt to efface his wife's identity by battering her face suggests his need to render her unrecognizable as the iconic figure of domestic harmony. His daughter attempts to reason with him by advertising her fitness for a domestic, maternal role, replacing her mother in the household: "O father, my dear father, spare me, let me live—let me live,—I will be a comfort to you and my mother—spare me to take care of my little sister Diana—do—do let me live" The conflict Yates feels at this has, perhaps, sexual overtones. She is described as his "darling" and he makes her perform for him before he finally kills her. This accords with T. Walter Herbert's observation that the victims of sexual violence:

become gender scapegoats; they are seen to embody what the man finds "unmanly" in himself. Punishing them temporarily fends off anxieties by confirming the illusion that the man's troubles come from others, not from within himself. Because sexual desire is among the forces threatening such masculinity, compensatory violence enters sexual relations; and conversely, wife beating, homophobic assault, and child abuse frequently carry an erotic tinge. (13–4)

However, if Yates's violence all seems pointedly to attack the feminine, this 1796 version of the narrative makes an effort to redress the balance with the heroic figure of his sister Nelly, who replaces the "brother" who takes responsibility for Yates in

the 1781 report. Not only does she overpower him in the conspicuous absence of her husband, she acts decisively to overcome her fears in an attempt to rescue the family, forming a notable contrast to the incapacitated father of Mrs Yates, who is reduced to inarticulate moaning by the horror of what he encounters. This inarticulacy is a stylistic convention borrowed from Gothic fiction—the familiar speechlessness that is the “natural” response to scenes of horror. The Gothic element of the narrative was recognized and amplified by Brockden Brown, but even this short narrative is clearly playing on its readers’ instinctive shock over the violation of sentimental domesticity. As Karen Halttunen has argued, the increasingly popular subgenre of crime literature to which this narrative belongs made regular use of the “convention of speechlessness,” which “indicated an inability to assign meaning to the transgression” (55–6).

The political theorist Hannah Arendt has written that “Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws ... but everything and everybody must fall silent” (18). Nelly, however, despite her horror, does not lose the power of speech. Nor has the extraordinary brutality of the murders rendered the author of this account incapable of describing them—indeed, they are described with an unflinching, forensic detail that is genuinely disturbing. It is, finally, this act of writing—of reasserting the primacy of language—that is the narrative’s achievement, and why it can ultimately be read not as an apocalyptic warning of the dangers of early republican society, as Axelrod suggests, but as reassurance that that society can reassert order in the face of even the most appalling disorder. The anonymous author of the narrative seems to have recognized that the story’s Shaker origins made this tale an excellent vehicle for an exploration of gender politics, and provided an opportunity, if not to save the female victims of

Yates's violence, at least to memorialize them, and to provide her readers with a heroic female role model in the figure of Nelly. By "speaking violence" so unblinkingly, the "Unfortunate Account of J——Y——" brings the apparently unspeakable back within the rational confines of a civic culture in which women were playing an increasingly important ideological role, containing his violence as surely as Albany jail confined the killer himself.

Notes

1. An early reviewer makes this link explicitly in the *American Review and Literary Journal* (January 1801): 333–9. For more discussion of this review, and the probability that it may have been written by Brown himself, see Williams 644–5 and Axelrod 53–63.
2. See *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, The American Oracle of Liberty*, 11.562 (14 February 1782), 3. Reprinted in *The Connecticut Gazette and Universal Intelligencer*, 19.954 (22 February 1782), 3.
3. *The Pennsylvania Packet*, 11.834 (17 January 1782), 3; *The Salem Gazette*, 1.17 (7 February 1782), 3; *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, The American Oracle of Liberty*, 11.563 (21 February, 1782), 3; and *The Independent Ledger, and The American Advertiser*, 4.196 (11 February 1782).
4. Dana D. Nelson makes a brief reference to this report (61–2), but doesn't seem to have read it, as she calls Yates "John" instead of "James," and offers no extended discussion of this narrative's details or its relation to the later version. Her source seems to have been an unpublished dissertation by Neil King Fitzgerald.
5. Mitchell gives a macabre description of the townspeople's horrified response to the crime. Almost a month after the murders, a number of newspapers printed an article written by "A Friend to Justice," demanding that Beadle's corpse be dug up and

publicly displayed upon a gibbet, to “make him a spectacle of horror to infidels”— see, for instance *The New Jersey Gazette* 6.266 (29 January 1783).

6. *Salem Mercury*, 3.119 (20 January 1789), 3.

7. For an interesting discussion of religion in the novel, see Surratt.

8. See, for example, *Salem Gazette* 1.22 (14 March 1782); *The Massachusetts Spy* 12.573 (26 April 1782).

9. The link between the Shakers’ celibacy and their policy of gender equality may not immediately be apparent, but in the eyes of their New England critics, both practices undermined “family stability, gender relations, and patriarchal prerogative” (Seeman, 412).

10. This association is clear in an advertisement for Rathbun’s work from *The Massachusetts Spy*, 12.574 (2 May 1782). The book is said to contain an account of the Shaker community at Niskeyuna, with an appended “dialogue” between King George and his ministers, “the whole being a discovery of the wicked machinations of the principal enemies of America.”

11. Daniel and Valentine Rathbun were brothers, and both prominent Baptist ministers in the region. After their initial interest in the Shakers, they became two of its fiercest critics. Valentine’s son Reuben also published an apostate account of the Shakers in 1800.

12. In fact, the Address by the Editors at the beginning of Volume II (in which the Yates account appears) announces the intention to change the name of the publication to the *Sentimental and Literary Magazine*. The editors then declare that the magazine is “devoted solely to literature.”

13. All references to this text are to the original *New York Weekly Magazine* version.

14. See Samuels, 48–9, who remarks that “Thirty-five replies to Paine’s *Age of Reason* were published within a decade of its appearance (1794–1796), suggesting the alarm with which it was received.”

15. Many of the most prominent citizens of Albany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century shared the name Yates. Perhaps most famous was Judge Robert Yates, Chief Justice of the New York State Supreme Court from 1790 to 1798. Judge Yates stood unsuccessfully for the governorship of New York State in 1795, losing out to John Jay. Whether or not James Yates was actually a scion of the prestigious Albany Yateses (and there is no other evidence that he was), it is tempting to see a brief allusion to the family in this sentence. Certainly, readers in New York in 1796 would probably have made the connection.

16. This is certainly Ann Eliza Bleecker, the writer, whose own *Posthumous Works* had been published at the instigation of her daughter, Margaretta Bleecker Faugères, in 1793. Faugères, who would have been eight years old at the time of the murders and could well have been privy to local gossip on the affair, was active in the literary world of mid-1790s New York, and is a convincing candidate for the authorship of the Yates narrative. For a more detailed account of Faugères’s literary activities, see Harris 13–30. Bleecker provides another link to Brockden Brown, who was a friend and correspondent of Anthony Bleecker, nephew of Ann Eliza, and cousin of Margaretta. A lawyer by profession, Anthony had literary aspirations, contributing poetry to New York periodicals during this period. He and Brown were both members of the loose intellectual circle known as “the Friendly Club.”

17. For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Kerber.

18. The early republic witnessed an unusually high number of familicides, of which Yates’s was the earliest; Cohen provides a detailed overview of these cases.

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