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MIDNIGHT AT MARBLE ARCH

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An Analysis of Violence Against Women in Anne Perry's *Midnight at Marble Arch*

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ABSTRACT

The female victim is not a rare element in crime novels. And Anne Perry's *Midnight at Marble Arch* is not an exception; actually, there are two female rape victims. This paper proposes analysing how this story can be read in the context of the #MeToo movement against assault and sexual harassment. To do so, the article will review two aspects: the construction of the victims, and the representations of the investigators.

KEY WORDS: Anne Perry, *Midnight at Marble Arch*, violence against women, crime novels, rape

RESUMEN

Las víctimas mujeres no son un elemento inusual en la novela negra. Y *Midnight at Marble Arch* (*Medianoche en Marble Arch*) de Anne Perry no es la excepción; de hecho, hay dos mujeres víctimas de violación. Este artículo propone analizar cómo esta historia puede ser leída en el contexto del movimiento #MeToo (#YoTambién) contra el abuso y el acoso sexual. Para hacerlo, el artículo revisará dos aspectos: la construcción de las víctimas y la representación de los investigadores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Anne Perry, *Midnight at Marble Arch*, violencia contra la mujer, novela negra, violación.

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INTRODUCTION

“Women has been a constant as victims since the three Dupin cases...” (Priestman 182). Priestman is talking about Edgar Allan Poe’s creation: C. Auguste Dupin. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) the victims are a mother and her daughter; in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1843), there’s another dead woman who is found in the River Seine and in “The Purloined Letter” (1844), the victim is not dead, but the unnamed young woman is under the power of a government official who has stolen a letter with delicate matters in it from her. There’s an issue about power and women in crime stories, or rather, about how male power is exercised to the detriment of women. Poe writes this about Mary Rogêt’s crime: “The atrocity of this murder, (for it was at once evident that murder had been committed,) the youth and beauty of the victim, and, above all, her previous notoriety, conspire to produce intense excitement in the minds of the sensitive Parisians.” Mary was young and beautiful, but her reputation was also questioned. She worked because of her beauty and she had previously disappeared, leaving all sorts of gossip behind. This history of women in crime narrative is present in Anne Perry’s *Midnight at Marble Arch* (2015), but in this case the author used the female victims in order to criticise the way women are diminished in our societies. There are two female victims who were raped in *Marble Arch*, and patriarchal power is an important issue in the crimes as well as in the investigation; but the traditional discourse of women being responsible, or even being guilty, of their own fate is put into question by the narrator. In this paper I will analyse how rape and violence against women are constructed in order to foster a feminist discourse, which denounces how women and men are treated differently in patriarchal societies. To do so, I will address two aspects: the construction of the victims and the representations of the investigators.

“THE BODY OF CATHERINE QUIXWOOD WAS LYING SPRAWLED”

Midnight at Marble Arch (2015) is a Charlotte and Thomas Pitt novel. The series about a married pair of detectives living in Victorian London was created by Anne Perry in the late 1970’s. Since then Perry has published over thirty of these novels; *Marble Arch* is the 28th adventure. The story is set in London, 1896; the Victorian era is fading away. This was supposed to be a time of splendour and progress, Britain’s golden years in which public schools were reformed, the

population almost doubled, and there was economic prosperity and a buoyant industrialization. However, although the head of the empire was a woman, Queen Victoria, women were still a secondary character.

In this novel, Perry presents two female rape victims. Both women are very distinctive and different characters, and the way in which Perry portrays the crimes and the corresponding investigations are also different. One victim is clearly exposed. Catherine Quixwood was found dead in her own home, lying on the floor, while her husband was at a party. Here we read the typical police crime scene. The body covered with a sheet, police officers on the scene, a surgeon coming to check the body. The narration is direct, although the narrator expresses empathy for the victim:

She was wearing a light summer skirt of flowered silk and a muslin blouse, or what remained of it. It had been ripped open at the front, exposing what could be seen of her bosom.

There were deep gouges in her flesh, as if someone had dragged their fingernails across the skin, bruising and tearing it. ... Her naked thighs were bruised, and from the blood and other fluids it was painfully obvious that she had been raped as well as beaten (Perry 21).

The other one is the silenced crime. Angeles Castelbranco, the sixteen-year-old daughter of the Portuguese ambassador, has been raped, but the family does not want to report the crime.

Catherine's violation and death are officially a crime that has to be investigated by the metropolitan police; while the rape of Angeles, on the contrary, prompts an informal investigation, that is instigated by Charlotte, who supports her husband in the inquiries. Interestingly, Perry puts Thomas, who is the head of a police special branch, to investigate Angeles's rape, the non-reported crime. And Catherine's crime, although it is officially investigated by the police, is also covered by an informal sleuth: Narraway, Thomas's former boss, who is now retired. There seems to be a statement here: because the official line of investigation is full of prejudices, the crimes have to be approached from the margins. The narrative exposes immediately one of the issues regarding rape crimes: some victims do not report them because of what it implies; that is to say, that the victim is judged for her actions and omissions.

“Historically, numbers of women complainants in rape trials have been regarded with suspicion or prejudiced, their credibility as witnesses seriously called into question or undermined, both from within and outside the courtroom” (Stevenson 343-344). This is exactly what happened with Catherine. She is questioned from the beginning of the inquiry because she wasn’t with her husband at the party; instead, she was alone at home. Being a banker’s wife, it was expected of her to accompany her husband every time it was required. In fact, this is addressed by the police when interviewing Catherine’s maid: “Mrs. Quixwood stayed at home alone this evening. Why was that, do you know? And please give me the truth, ma’am. Being polite and discreet may not actually be the best loyalty you can give right now” (Perry 30). The policeman is implying that the reason may be inappropriate for the wife of a wealthy man. The maid, however, replies: “Mrs. Quixwood wasn’t all that fond of parties” (Perry 30). Nevertheless, the police inquiry portrays Catherine as a woman who is not fulfilling her role as a proper wife. This would only be getting worse with every single discovery, until, as readers, we wonder if the police are looking for the rapist, or if they are judging Catherine. It is clear, then, that a parallel investigation must be held.

Angeles is also questioned, even though no one knows about her being raped. The book opens with a party scene. Charlotte and Thomas are there as guests, and they witnessed how Angeles is being harassed by an older youth, Neville Forsbrook, the son of an important banker. The young man talks and looks at Angeles with the confidence of power. Priestman points out how some crime novels “show how society is stacked in favour of male, as well as financial and political, power...” (187); and this is what is expressed throughout the whole scene. Angeles tries unsuccessfully to avoid the man’s innuendo, while Neville recriminates and ridicules her for being aware of his intentions. The young man’s course of action varies in response to Angeles’s efforts to escape the situation. We can observe this reflected in three of Neville’s statements. First, he accuses Angeles of being “quite unreasonable” (Perry 6); therefore, the reasonable thing in his eyes would have been to stay and listen. Then he says to Angeles: “You misunderstood me” (6); that is, his intentions are not the problem, but how Angeles interprets those intentions. And finally, he finishes by implying that Angeles is the one behaving oddly by being elusive, nervous and trying to leave: “You’ll have to get

used to admiration” (6). The narrator, who exposed the situation backing up Angeles’s position, lets us know that admiration really means looking at her with “just a fraction too much candor” (6); that is, Angeles is being harassed and then attacked for not giving her consent. It is not just what Neville Says, but how he says it: he speaks loudly and seductively, irrupting in Angeles personal space. The room is full of people, and all of them have watched the scene without becoming involved. Furthermore, people judge Angeles for not knowing how to act properly, or because she is young and foreign, and, because she is a woman as well. This we can see expressed in a conversation, where an elderly man says: “Young ladies tend to be rather excitable, my dear” (Perry 7). Moreover, another woman implies that being admired by Neville Forsbrook is a desirable situation: “[he] has been kind enough to show a very flattering interest in my youngest daughter” (Perry 8).

The previous scene is still a plausible today, in spite of the #MeToo movement; the international movement against assault and sexual harassment, initiated in October 2017¹, a new feminist wave that challenged how women are approached by men. Even today you can hear expressions like: *you don't know how to receive a compliment, you are overreacting*, or *I was just being flattering*. Perry chose to offer a counter position in the characters of Charlotte and Thomas, making it very clear that despite the Victorian setting, she is addressing a current issue. In front of the people judging Catherine and Angeles, Perry presents Charlotte’s voice which expresses that women do not deserve to be treated like this; women do not ask for it; women should not have to endure harassment. As Reddy describes: “Like other feminist crime fiction, these novels tend to link the particular crime under investigation to wider social issues involving women” (201). This is precisely what Perry does: she establishes two crimes of violence against women, and instead of conveying it as it would have been done in the Victorian time (women blamed for the actions of men), she introduces the current perspective in order to rise a social critic regarding the status of women in patriarchal societies.

¹ The movement spreads virally through social medial, using the hashtag #MeToo to express individual experiences of harassment and assault.

“THEY WILL SAY THAT SOMEHOW IT WAS YOUR OWN FAULT”

Perry configures her narrator with a feminist twist, in order to question how women were undermined during the Victorian period and still are. Interestingly, in the English context, the Victorian era is considered relevant in the construction of the status of the raped woman. “It was during the mid-Victorian period, with the rise of ‘respectability’, that many of these attitudes began to crystallise into legal imperatives, creating a cultural mystification and contextualisation of the female rape victim and the crime of rape itself” (Stevenson 344). Stevenson is writing about cultural attitudes that reinforced the stereotype of the woman who was provoking the rapist.

This is exposed by Perry in both victims. The respectability of both Catherine and Angeles is questioned because they were raped. This concept that settled in the Victorian period, as Stevenson proposes, is still widely sustained in Western patriarchal societies. This seems to be what Perry is trying to denounce in *Marble Arch*; which she does through the married pair of detectives, Charlotte and Thomas, and the different ways in which they perceive and handle the case.

The construction of Charlotte, especially, is directed to conform a disruptive voice. She is a woman born and raised in a wealthy context, but who leaves everything behind to marry Thomas, whose origins are modest. She is a rather subversive character, even though she married and became a mother. But she is neither a typical wife, nor a common mother: she is always speaking her mind, though she does so in an interesting, tactful way. For instance, she does not raise her voice ever, and speaks her dissenting opinions with a calm smile; except when she is talking with her husband:

‘For the love of heaven, Thomas!’ Charlotte said between her teeth. ‘How on earth would you know how many rapes there are? Who is going to talk about it? Who’s going to report it to the police? And do you really think that it’s never young men we know who could do such things?’ (Perry 117).

The story counters the myth that rapists are mean, strange men. If Angeles’s parents are eager to maintain the secrecy of what happened, it’s not just because she is young, and they are in a foreign country, it’s because they know who did it and the power he holds at a financial, political, social, and, in their case, also at a personal level.

Perry also tries to expose the victim-blaming attitude. This is especially appreciated in the mother-daughter relationship. Since the beginning of the story, when Charlotte witnesses how Neville harasses Angeles in front of a room full of people, she focuses on her own daughter, Jemima, who is fourteen years old, that is, at the verge of parties and social exposition. Charlotte, then, has a conversation with her daughter about growing up, changes, and how things are for women in a society that privileges its male members:

‘And as you have already heard, people will tend to blame you,’ Charlotte continued. ‘They will say that somehow it was your own fault. You were dressed in such a way that he thought you were willing, or that you invited him and only said ‘no’ at the last moment. Or he may even say you were perfectly happy at the time, but that you are now claiming it is his fault now so that you are not to blame for losing your virginity, and therefore your reputation’ (Perry 188-189).

Charlotte’s words could seem out of time. Is that the way in which a Victorian mother would have talked to her daughter? Probably not, but although the story is settled in the late Victorian period, it’s not an objective in this novel to share the Victorian discourse; on the contrary, Perry is configuring these crimes to talk about an issue affecting women still today: violence against women.

Jemima is configured to emphasise the subject of violence against women. As a girl, Jemima represents the contradictory value of innocence that was appreciated in Victorian times. Childhood and innocence have been connected since the eighteenth century, with the notion that children should “be cherished for their primal innocence and authenticity” (Gubar 122). The ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake and William Wordsworth were key to the construction of this ideal (Gubar 122). But the concept of innocence is complicated. It implies being free from sin, being pure, unharmed, and even asexual. However, that same innocent child is seen as “attractive” (Gubar 121), that is, the alleged innocence of the child is sexually desired by adults. We can see this in how Angeles Castelbranco is harassed by Neville, this young and sexually experienced man. Charlotte knows that her daughter Jemima is maturing into a woman, and that her innocence and her virginity would be desired by others. She is more vulnerable because she is a child and a girl. Charlotte

verbalized this idea: “Jemima’s still a little self-conscious, but she has curves, and more than one young man has looked at her a second and third time—including her dance teacher and the rector’s son” (Perry 12).

Perry puts the idea of innocence into question. If innocence also implies that children do not know about things, she is taking the children out of this space of ignorance. In this context, we can understand how Charlotte talks to her daughter. She informs Jemima; she tells her how the world functions. We can find this same notion in a family dinner scene. The Pitts are dining in the kitchen, and Jemima asks: “Papa, what happened to Mrs. Quixwood? Why did she kill herself?²” (Perry 186). Eating is then replaced by a conversation about raping. Thomas is rather cautious:

“She was attacked in a very personal way,” Pitt replied, looking at Daniel. “Parts of the body that are private. And then she was badly beaten. She drank some wine with medicine in it, possibly to dull the pain, and she took too much, perhaps by accident, and that is what she died of.” (Perry 186).

And he is even more careful when trying to explain it to his son Daniel, who is quite startled. Here Perry shows the expected: the innocent child who does not know about sexual matters. Thomas is consistent with this and tries to keep the innocent view: “When you are older you will develop certain appetites and desires toward women. It’s a natural part of becoming a man. You will learn how to control them and, most important, that you do not make love to a woman unless she is as willing as you are” (Perry 186). The affirmation creates doubts in both children, so Charlotte is the one using the correct term: “... rape can happen to any woman ... Just like being struck by lightning” (Perry 186). Thomas himself wonders if dinner is the proper time for a sexual education talk, but he does not question if his children are old enough for it. First, we can acknowledge the setting. They are dining in the kitchen; this seems to create a space in which children have a different status, which allows them to speak openly to their parents. And second, that different status connects with the field of Childhood Studies.

In this multidisciplinary field, children are not seen as passive, dependent or incomplete, but as active and competent participants in society. So, the focus is not on what children will become

² Later we will know that the suicide was staged, and Catherine Quixwood was murdered.

(children as the future of a nation, for instance), but on what children are at present (Kehily 2004). Thomas and Charlotte address their children through that perspective. Instead of telling them that they are too young or just ignoring them, they listen to their doubts and concerns, and give honest and straightforward answers in order to make them aware and conscious. Therefore, Perry is not only questioning women's position in society, but also that of girls and boys. We should remember that women and children inhabit the same domestic and private space in patriarchal societies in which they should be silent and obedient around male power. Through the focuses of feminism and childhood studies, Perry questions this very nuclear notion, and gives both, women and children, voice, agency, and the right not to be oppressed by patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

In the Victorian context, just as today, women were the aim of prejudices and victims were considered responsible for their own rape. Perry could have exposed this solely by showing how, in Charlotte and Thomas's time, women were objectified, and valued just in terms of untouched possessions; but she chose to transform the investigation into a political and social debate: what kind of society are we creating, what can we do to raise fewer rapists, and how can we give women justice and stop stigmatising them? We can observe this in Thomas. At the beginning he cannot find the time "to [make] discreet inquiries into the character and reputation of Angeles Castelbranco" (117); the stress of the investigation is put onto Angeles: did she get herself into this situation? But, as the story progresses, and with the influence of Charlotte's inquisitive voice, he can see that the one guilty of a violation is the man who perpetrates it. This is reflected in Thomas's concerns for his own son, Daniel, who is eleven years old. First, he wonders what he could do "if Daniel, grown to adulthood, should be wrongly accused of such a violent and repulsive crime?" (Perry 160), reflecting the common opinion: women who report a violation are probably lying.

This line of thought prevailed even in the parliamentary debate on the decriminalization of abortion in three causes held in Chile in 2016 and 2017³. The project proposes not to prosecute women who undergo an abortion in any of these three causes: when the woman was raped, when

³ The Law of Abortion in Three Causes in Chile was approved in August 2017 and promulgated on September 14th of that same year.

the life of the woman is in vital danger, and when the foetus has a pathology incompatible with extra uterine life. The more polemic discussion was the one related with the cause of the rape because its only condition was the woman's word about being raped, which was put into question by some congressmen. That reasoning, Perry's narrator says, shames Thomas, and makes him wonder what would be of his son in six or seven years ahead. In order to stop violence against women, Perry pushes the circle of responsibilities further, reaching out to parents and all members of a society:

How would he [Thomas] prevent Daniel from becoming a young man who treated women as something he had the right to use, to hurt, even to destroy? Where did such beliefs begin? How would he ever make certain his son could lose any competition with the same grace as when he won? That he would govern himself in temper, loss, even humiliation? The answer was obvious—he must learn at home. Would it be Pitt's fault if Daniel grew up arrogant, brutal? Of course it would (Perry 160).

Thomas concludes that neglecting to teach his son to respect women, or that *no means no*, are critical omissions. The underlying ideology that Perry is questioning is that girls must be taught to behave themselves to not provoke men: by dressing properly, by not drinking, not going about alone, not flirting, and so on. But are societies educating boys in not attacking women no matter how they act or dress? Thomas is finally developing empathy for the victims; he is trying to put himself in the victims' shoes. This change of perception is what pushes Thomas not to quit until he discovers who the actual offenders are: the rapist and the murderer, because Catherine Quixwood was also murdered. At the end of the story, the reader knows the identity of the villains, and this provides closure for both victims, whose reputations are no longer on trial.

My aim in this article was not to unravel the mystery, but to address the prejudice regarding women's status in society. In this story, the violations and the murder are an instrument to expose how women suffer oppression in patriarchal societies. I was interested in analysing the violence against women through the lenses of our contemporary context of the #MeToo movement, showing how *Midnight at Marble Arch* connects with this movement, denouncing victim blaming and the privileged status of men to the detriment of women's status. I showed how this is carried out by

Perry by portraying an evolving situation. We initiate the novel at a point in which violence against women is both physical (the rapes, the murder) and psychological (their reputations questioned). And through the inquiries held by the Pitts, and the ways this influences their minds and actions, the status of women (Victorian and today women) is reviewed and discussed, in order to pose that women do not deserve the violence that is perpetrated against us. In that sense, Perry's crime novel precedes the #MeToo movement, by presenting two individual -although fictional- experiences of harassment, assault, and murder, aiming at exposing the ambivalent condition of women in Western society: desired and disposed at men's requirements. Regarding the construction of the victims, the narrator allows the readers to meet the women and not the stereotyped version of the female victims. And regarding the configuring of the investigators, Charlotte and Thomas, the focus is no longer on victim blaming of women, but in understanding their condition, and questioning the pillars that support the violence against women in our societies. The purpose is not only to offer a critical view, that is to criticise this violence, but to think about how we can stop the violence against women.

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