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MONSTER IN MUSLIN: LIZZIE BORDEN, AMERICAN MYTH-MAKING, AND THE REGENERATION OF THE NEW ENGLAND SPINSTER

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By: Paula Uruburu

The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness.

Emile Durkheim[1]

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.

Richard Slotkin[2]

History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end-product, myth.

E. L. Doctorow[3]

Introduction

The process of inventing and telling stories or 'myth-making' is natural. It is something that the human mind is disposed to do.[4] As well the "natural narrative" formula that writers engage in (as described by linguists William Labov and Mary Louise Pratt) shares either consciously or unconsciously in the patterns of myth-making, so much so that we must be constantly mindful of the ways in which writers as "myth-artists" can manipulate facts to make a more compelling story, since it is also the case that the construction of social myths gradually takes on the quality of plausible explanation or 'truth' until eventually the myths themselves create the illusion that some collective understanding has been attained – even when it is a fiction.[5]

In creating narratives rooted in their own experience, human beings have come to rely on clearly identifiable cultural images and symbols, metaphors and models, to make sense of their world. Characterized by classicist G. S. Kirk as a "cultural storehouse," myths, while based on fact, are often strongly reminiscent of dreams, which suspend or distort common reasoning and normal relationships and produce their own "special kind of logic."[6]

In America, myth-making has been a national pastime since the first English settlers arrived in the virgin wilderness on their 'errand' to establish a New Jerusalem – their new world 'City upon a Hill' – even if they did not actually land on Plymouth Rock and that virgin wilderness was already inhabited.[7] Since then, larger-than-life and often uncanny figures have emerged from those primeval woods, transformed over time into spectres both fierce and instructive. Some are fierce simply for their ability to endure, often beyond easy or reasonable explanation, even when they have been proven false or are highly suspect. The story of young George Washington comes to mind, who 'fessed up to his father after he chopped down a cherry tree with his new hatchet that he could not "tell a lie."[8] Others are instructive in terms of what they reveal about the zeitgeist of a particular period and often the specific region where they took shape, such as the "Moonlight and Magnolias" myth which romanticized the 'peculiar institution' of slavery for Southern apologists after the Civil War.[9] Then there are those figures whose stories transcend both time and place. They are simultaneously familiar and strange, evoking primal fears and desires, and occupy every shelf in the storehouse of myth. Such is the case with Miss Lizzie A. Borden, who hacked her way into history and myth on a blazing hot August afternoon in Fall River, Massachusetts in 1892.

Although it is more than a century since Andrew Borden and his second wife, Abby Durfee Borden, were butchered in their overheated home on 92 Second Street on what began as an ordinary summer morning in an ordinary New England mill town, the burning questions of 'who done it?' and 'why?'– coupled with the grisly telling and retelling of the details surrounding the murders – continue to invite analysis.[10]

There are some today who might be surprised to discover that Lizzie Borden is a real person, so overpowering has the fictive become in the telling of her tale. There are also probably more than a few people who would be surprised to learn that buried beneath a century of myth-making and suppositions is the fact that Lizzie Borden was found not guilty. Yet despite that verdict, in most of the narratives that have emerged over time, there at the top of a winding staircase stands Lizzie Borden, laughing in the face of Death, axe in hand, haunting the house of American popular culture.[11] She was then and remains today a subject of fascination and speculation, even though (unlike the hero-protagonists of ancient myth) she was routinely and repeatedly described to be as unremarkable as Fall River itself. But that is one reason why, unlike her father and stepmother, Lizzie has refused to die.

On one level, Lizzie Borden's story is nearly a complete inversion of the dream-myth of the common man, one of the most beloved in the storehouse of the national mythology. Lizzie Borden, a middle-aged woman from a typical New England town, rises from nothing to fame (and ultimately fortune), not through good works or exceptional talent, but through violence. If we believe the majority of myth-artists who have told her story, she was the author of her own fate and 'self-made' in the worst way. But this, too, is a fiction, since her culture made her and continues to shape her in its own likeness. The continuous interest in the Lizzie Borden story, the popularity of Lizzie herself as cultural icon (whether Victorian villainess or modern anti-hero, spinster-victim or lesbian-feminist), the various uses to which her story has been put by critics and purveyors of pop culture, and the nature of the symbolism employed by the mythology that has grown up around her, are all fueled by continuing cultural anxieties that cut right to the heart (pardon the pun) of some of the most sacred American myths. Many of these myths have their roots in the same New England soil as Lizzie Borden, and may help explain her longevity in the collective consciousness.

Of course, as most of us are aware, even scholars who address themselves to the problem of “the myth of America” have “a marked tendency to engage in the manufacture of the myth they pretend to analyze …,” and I claim no special immunity.[12] As a result, however, many find themselves struggling with “the dead hand of the past,” even though, as the greatest Southern ‘myth-artist,’ William Faulkner, said, “The past is not dead. It is not even the past.”[13] In spite of widespread uncertainty, misinformation, half-truths spun from whole cloth, and a “peculiarly ambivalent” attitude many Americans have in regard to their national mythology, there is a great deal to be learned from the construction of these myths that draw heavily on the unconscious and the deepest levels of the psyche, even from the dead hand of the past, especially if there is an axe (or to be more accurate, a hatchet) in that hand.[14]

Why has Lizzie Borden (or her ghost) survived in the popular mind when so many others have vanished from the hazy cultural landscape? Are there specific elements of her story that are essential to its persistence in America’s collective memory? What is it about her that resonated with her own contemporaries and haunts us still?

On the surface, it is easy to see why the “Fall River Tragedy” (as it was initially referred to by the first of many Lizzie Borden myth-artists) continues to prick our collective consciousness.[15] In the vein of current pop culture currents, it is perfect material for so-called reality television, a concept that is itself a myth, especially if we keep in mind Nabokov’s admonition that “reality” is a word which should always be in quotation marks.[16] But Lizzie Borden’s is a true story. It concerns a prominent and wealthy family whose fortune was hard won, the result of that familiar American dream-mixture of puritanical stoicism and Yankee stubbornness, yet mired in the waking nightmare of family dysfunction and rooted in death even before the murders (Andrew Borden started out as Fall River’s undertaker.) The persons killed were an elderly man and his unsuspecting wife. The person charged in the killings was not the usual suspect but rather a woman, the younger daughter in the household, and supposedly her father’s favourite. As the story goes, the weapon of choice was not the poison typically associated with that rarer genteel breed known as the Victorian murderess (although the prospect of poisoning is also part of the story), but the more masculine and emasculating axe.[17] The ghastly murders were clearly fueled by an incomprehensible rage in an age that had not yet coined the term *overkill.*[18] And, most importantly, the case remains unsolved. At least, that is what it says 'on the books.'

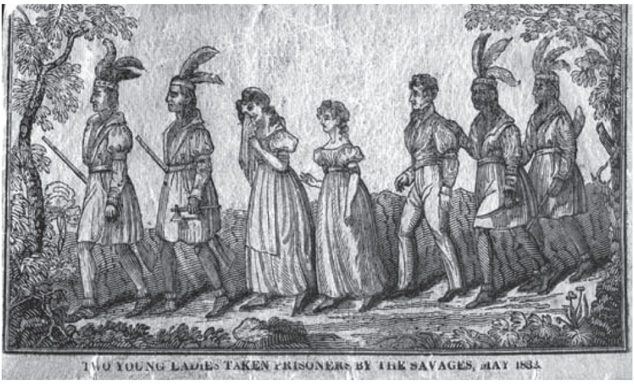
The persistent desire to solve the crime, invest it with meaning, or cash in on its iconography, has led to a profusion of high and low culture expressions over the years, including a ballet (choreographed by Agnes DeMille), two operas, several plays, more than a dozen works of fiction and non-fiction, a graphic novel, a pulp paperback, a comic book, short stories, poems, bobble head dolls, jewelry, outsider art, Halloween costumes, an infamous made-for-TV movie, an off-Broadway musical, a cable television mini-series (in the works,) and, my particular favourite, the folkie song "You Can't Chop Your Papa Up in Massachusetts."[19] The sheet music for that song sits cheekily on the piano in the parlor of the Borden house, which still stands almost exactly as it did in 1892 and which, true to the protean nature of American myth-making, keeps reinventing itself. Business is happily and morbidly brisk at the house-turned-infamous crime scene-turned-Lizzie Borden Bed and Breakfast. Guests can eat the same fateful last meal of johnnycakes with molasses (thankfully, minus the mutton broth).[20] Staying in the guest room where Abby Borden was slashed to death often means a waiting list for those eager to share vicariously in the blood-spattered mythology of the *Girl in the House of Hate* (1953).[21]

> WHY HAS LIZZIE BORDEN (OR HER GHOST) SURVIVED IN THE POPULAR MIND WHEN SO MANY OTHERS HAVE VANISHED FROM THE HAZY CULTURAL LANDSCAPE?

We can also add to the pop culture list of variations on the Lizzie Borden theme the recent spate of television series concerned with the supernatural and the paranormal (*Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Watch*, etc.), all of which want to make the case that the Borden house is haunted and prove it is one of "America's creepiest destinations." Ghosts, like myths, are especially hard to lay to rest. And, of course, as with all good ghost stories, the art is in the telling.

Into the Woods and Out

In turning our attention first to the New England-centered "creation-myth" of the national character, an identity described as having been torn violently from the "implacable and opulent wilderness,"[22] we can employ historian Richard Slotkin's identification and interrogation of that myth (where he distinguishes between archetype, folk legend, and artistic mythopoesis), to help explain why the story of Lizzie Borden continues to resonate in the popular mind, because hers is also a myth inextricably linked to long-buried but frequently unearthed cultural perceptions about home and captivity, Puritanism, sexual identity, and violence. "Almost from the moment of its literary genesis, the New England captivity narrative functioned as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view … into archetypal drama."[23]



TWO YOUNG LADIES TAKEN PRISONERS BY THE SAVAGES, MAY 1832

The mythic drama of the New England Indian captivity narrative, and what it ultimately came to represent to the early white settlers in terms of acutely felt guilt over race, gender, class, isolation, and religious doctrine, has been replayed and reworked countless times in the construction of our national mythology. We see it in the "historically-allegorical" works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, another inspired myth-artist, who is himself intimately tied to the guilty Puritan conscience of 17th century Salem and its witch hysteria. Through stories such as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), Hawthorne forces us to recognize that the path into and out of the devilish woods is a perilous psychological journey that shapes self-perception and often ends somewhere between dream and nightmare.[24] What we can also see in reconfiguring Slotkin's analysis of the myth of regeneration through violence as delineated in the captivity genre, is that Lizzie Borden's house is a "home in the heart of darkness," even though it is neither the heathen wilderness of colonial America nor some untamed pantheistic western frontier, but rather a supposed civilized and Christian-centred east. Nonetheless, hers is a "darkened and inverted mirror image" of the familiar New England home and what it represented to a traumatized post-Civil War America attempting to "reconstruct" itself – and is certainly central to the foundation of Lizzie Borden's story as transformed into archetypal drama.[25]

Because of Andrew Borden's well-known miserliness, even in 1892, the somber, narrow, and claustrophobically constructed clapboard house at the wrong end of the hill that defined Fall River's class structure was not only more than forty years out of fashion, but hopelessly out of step with the times – with no electricity, no telephone, and no indoor plumbing that served as the usual bathroom for the more typical family of the period. A slop pail into which all the members of the household emptied their chamber pots every morning (kept in the kitchen next to the stove with no apparent consideration for either aesthetics or hygiene) served, along with a cold water pump in a dirt floor cellar and one in the barn, for washing of any kind. The house itself, as designed by its previous owner, was a virtual prison: a double 'railroad flat' with bars on all the cellar windows and no hallways, which meant that every room encroached upon the next with little expectation of privacy or ease of escape, as well as a fenced-in yard with barbed wire at the top – and bottom.

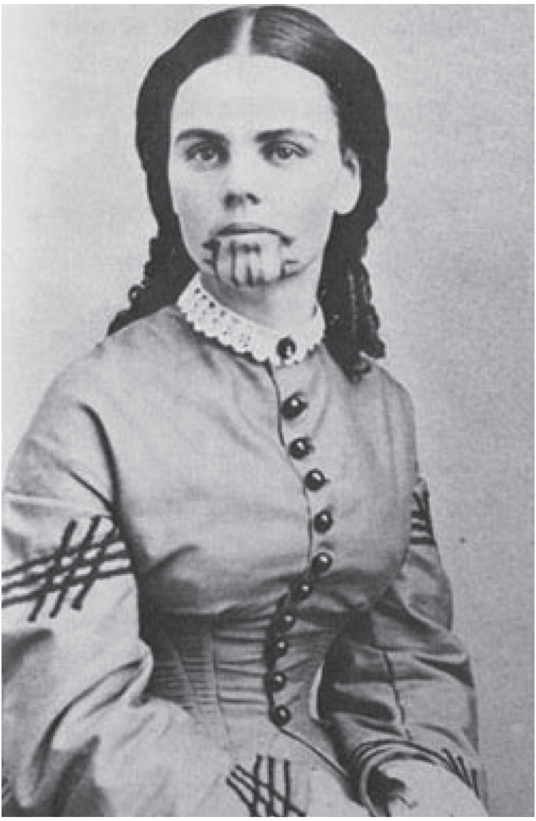
It was also common for the Bordens to sit like Conrad's Kurtz in "heavy mute silence" and literal darkness because Andrew Borden, who refused to pay for gaslight, wanted to save on kerosene. The fact that he was a bank president who also sat on the board of directors of several prosperous factories only served to make his skinflint ways appear more unreasonable to his fellow citizens, and torturous, particularly, so the story goes, to his younger daughter, Lizzie, whose social aspirations were thwarted by her father's obsessively anti-social and avaricious behaviour at every turn. Her life, like her house, was full of dead ends.

If we add to this the fact that she had been 'abandoned' by her biological mother (who died when she was three), that her stern and distant father, who had severed his ties with the church (for financial not doctrinal reasons, out of anger over taxes), had also killed "her children" a few months before the murders (when he beheaded all of Lizzie's pet pigeons), all coupled with the now "legendary" accounts of the typical fare in the Borden house – which often consisted of (and which was documented as the menu the week of the murders) meals of stale bread, overripe bananas, rancid milk, rotting fish, and three-day-old mutton – we again find ourselves within the confines of the captivity myth and certainly a 'house in the heart of darkness.'[26]

Although not the primitive or extreme ordeals as witnessed in the earliest New England narratives like Mary Rowlandson's[27] or the dime novels popular in Lizzie's day which described the perils of captivity in the wild west, in a genre whose plots and themes were dictated by the demands of myth and the fears of being exiles in a strange land, the parallels with Lizzie's myth are unmistakable.[28] Just as the didactic formula of the captivity narrative describes in vivid detail examples of unrelenting mental and physical abuse, near-starvation or unpalatable meals, spiritual trials, isolation, a sense of abandonment, the threat of sexual violation, and the dehumanization of the captives by their captors (and vice versa), to her contemporaries and subsequent generations, the myth of Lizzie's home life as a source of constant misery, suspected sexual abuse, alienation, social deprivation, utter dependence on an oppressive captor, and confinement from which there was little chance of liberation, serves the collective cultural memory as a painful reminder of darker times.[29] And perhaps even as a motive for murder.

Another dynamic of the Indian captivity narratives, the effects of a lengthy captivity on a good Christian woman who survived (eventually freed by force or saved through negotiated ransoming) as well as the collective reaction of the community to that woman after her release, is played out in Lizzie Borden's story as well.

In the original mythology, the rescue of a white woman from heathen captivity was initially a cause for celebration. It represented a restoration of social order, a victory over hellish external forces, and it reinforced the promise of salvation for a God-fearing community which regularly compared its story to that of the Israelites in the desert. The same cultural assumptions and impulses are at work in Lizzie's story, where the plain and pious Christian daughter of a respectable family represents the dominant culture whose social order is perceived to be under attack, not by godless redskins, but by low-life papists (Irish Catholics) and strange-tongued swarthy Portuguese, who comprised the two largest groups within the ethnic immigrant population in Fall River, and who were initially highest on the list of potential suspects for the vicious Borden killings (followed in no particular order by blacks, Italians and the Chinese.)



Olive Oatman, freed Indian captive with tribal chin tattoo

In the often paradoxical resolution of the traditional captivity narrative, despite the genre's insistence on the captive's exemplary behavior and unwavering defense of her innocence as defined by her whiteness, which reinforced her community's system of beliefs, the newly-freed captive also quickly elicited an adverse reaction from that same community. She had been transformed by her time in the woods into a disturbing Other, an object of pity, fear, and at times, revulsion. Having undoubtedly suffered irreparable damage by exposure to acts of unspeakable and inhuman cruelty, many considered that she was beyond redemption, and her return to the bosom of family and friends raised suspicions that the spiritual and physical catastrophe she had experienced would inevitably infect the whole community like smallpox.[30] In a number of cases, the community did not need to worry for long, since some captives chose to go back to the wilderness they had become accustomed to, many also having embraced the Catholicism of the French Jesuits who had converted them along with their captors.

However, those who stayed in their communities after their release bore both real and psychic scars and a heavy cultural burden, whether colonial victims of the divine mission into the wilderness or those rescued from a 'fate worse than death' on the frontier who became the 'collateral damage' of divine Manifest Destiny. One of the latter examples was Olive Oatman, an Arizona girl (originally from Illinois) ransomed after several years with the Mojave Indians. Oatman's ritual dark-inked, and almost beard-like, chin tattoo marked her indelibly as an Other.[31] Transformed into a disturbing hybrid, she had survived her family's massacre and five years in captivity, but at what price? Even though she declared in her own narrative, "to the honor of these savages let it be said, they never offered the least unchaste abuse to me," echoing Mary Rowlandson and other female captives, neither the perceived threat nor the reality of rape as expressed in the captivity narrative was as collectively frightening to the community as the idea of living with the Other. The true horror of miscegenation and assimilation was not in a violation of individual innocence/whiteness, but in the potential obliteration of the precious and fragile national identity.

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Similarly in Lizzie's case, her story of captivity, imprisonment, and liberation was mined for its "polemical and theological potential."[32] Beginning the day of the murders, Lizzie's pastor championed her innocence. He visited her every day in prison and sat by her side throughout the trial in a visible show of support, offering Sunday sermons to his congregation on the subject of her victimization, piety, and the belief, certainly shared and sustained in the popular consciousness, that no decent Christian woman from a respectable family (who also taught Sunday School) could be capable of committing such a violent crime.

Yet, even though she too was 'saved,' acquitted by a jury of twelve men and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the community which had supported

Lizzie throughout her persecution and trial (images with their own Biblical resonance), and celebrated her release from jail, quickly turned on her. Soon after she was declared not guilty, in an uncanny parallel, the pattern of the captivity myth was re-enacted, as uneasy and disquieting psychological tension began to surface in the congregation regarding the amount of irreparable harm Lizzie had done to their reputation and Fall River. This, together with suspicions that she might actually be guilty (evoking vestigial fears about savage murderous impulses and dreadful things lurking just beneath a facade of civilization and normalcy), led to Lizzie being ostracized and shunned.

In what must have been a troubling 'revision' of the earlier captivity narratives for the citizens of Fall River (in light of the shift implied between the empowered and the dispossessed), Lizzie Borden, in essence, paid her own ransom, having engaged as her lawyer a former governor of Massachusetts, George Robinson, for a whopping $25,000. And, in a much more frightening inversion of the original myth (especially to the growing number of those who believed that her lawyer's fee was 'blood-money'), Lizzie had effected her own release through violence, specifically, in an act of unspeakable brutality visited upon her own family members – and with a hatchet! The newspapers contributed significantly to the construction of this myth. They printed and embellished upon every gruesome detail of the attack as they imagined it (even if based on forensic evidence), including the fact that Abby Borden was nearly scalped (the false braid she usually wore was lopped off), while one of Andrew Borden's eyes had been cut loose from its socket, his face virtually obliterated. Even more sensational was the fact that the Bordens' actual skulls were brought into the courtroom and put on display, recalling not only ghastly scenes like those depicted in the captivity narratives, but certainly all-too-familiar and more recent images from the battlefields of Antietam and Gettsyburg.[33]

As the popular belief that she had gotten away with murder filtered into the collective consciousness, her increasing unpopularity and marginalization in Fall River was exacerbated by Lizzie's own inexplicable behavior. Contrary to some of her captive sister-ancestors, not only did Lizzie choose not to leave a community now stained with her own family's blood (even though no blood evidence was ever found on her), she stayed in Fall River, the only place on earth where she would be a 'marked' woman, easily identified and living under constant scrutiny and a cloud of suspicion.

In Lizzie's inverted Puritan myth, the captive's ultimate redemption proves spurious, and her salvation takes a decidedly profane and menacing turn, because in this story, it is the enterprising Yankee businessman who is brutally murdered. Rather than reaffirm the Calvinist belief that hard work is a crucial component of a person's worldly success and a visible sign of personal salvation (resulting in eternal happiness in God's 'house on high'), what is usually a liberating and inspiring dream-myth becomes an American nightmare. Not only is Andrew Borden's storied rise to financial success and lifetime of sober-living rendered meaningless, earning him (in the popular version) an axe in the brain, his daughter-murderer goes free. Adding insult to fatal injury, the offending daughter not only goes unpunished, she is rewarded with her father's considerable fortune once the dust settles on the headless Andrew and Abby Borden. After her acquittal, when Lizzie moved with her sister, Emma, into an earthly mansion (which she christened Maplecroft) situated on a literal hill, she outraged her fellow citizens, who felt she was flaunting her new-found freedom and newly-inherited wealth.[34]

As with the immensely popular genre of the captivity narrative, Lizzie's story "became very flexible" almost spontaneously, serving a wide range of cultural needs and agendas.[35] As mentioned earlier, the murders helped inflame pre-existing and simmering prejudices about the 'criminal tendencies' of certain races and ethnic groups at the bottom of the class structure who had appropriately settled at the bottom of the hill where the Bordens also lived. In keeping with the fears of a foreign Other invading their native soil, the Borden murders followed closely enough on the heels of Jack the Ripper's well-publicized killings in London's East End to convince some that the faceless phantom Jack had come to America. Lizzie's story was also prime material across the country for sermons and cautionary lectures as well as fodder for the yellow press. She became a cause célèbre for the fledgling women's movement, especially the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Spiritualists and psychics had a field day, as did both professional and amateur criminologists. It was such a sensational case that, among other things, it helped inspire a national interest in the area of forensic science. Still in relative infancy at the time, certain investigative techniques and methods (for example, the use of fingerprinting in criminal investigations, which only started to be used in America the year of the Borden murders, and the taking of crime scene photos) began to enter the public consciousness in large part because of the Lizzie Borden case.[36]

The Angel in the House and the Cult of Spinsterhood

There is another fundamental parallel and important mythic function at work when we compare the "picture in our heads" of the 17th and 18th century captive woman to that of another female archetype, the 19th century New England spinster. The archetypal image of the spinster and what she meant to the culture of her time mirrors assumptions about the Indian captives and also helps account for the persistence of Lizzie's narrative and iconic status, transformed in the popular mind into both social archetype and recognizable stereotype. In order for us to understand Lizzie's myth in the context of the spinster in mid-19th century popular culture, we must also compare the spinster to the other social archetype that was her counterpart, the one that was held up as the role model for women of the middle class above all – the angel in the house.

> ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF THE SPINSTER, IN SPITE OF THE TERM'S OBVIOUSLY FEMININE CAST, WAS HER LACK OF SEXUAL IDENTITY.

The phrase "Angel in the House," which comes from the title of an immensely popular poem, written in 1852, by a minor and otherwise forgettable British poet, Coventry Patmore (who in the poem held up his angel-wife as a model for all women), defined and perpetuated an image that restricted the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for women of the mid-Victorian period as unforgivingly as the whalebone corset. The pervasive image of the 'angel in the house' – an ideal woman who was expected to be devoted to husband and children, submissive, passive, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, pure – and utterly powerless – embedded itself in the Anglo-American Victorian consciousness and infected the middle-class like the grippe. Becoming increasingly popular through the rest of the 19th century, that image and what it represented lasted long enough into the 20th century to inspire another murder, albeit a symbolic one, by Virginia Woolf. In 1931 Woolf wrote that, "killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" and clipping its infernal wings was necessary for her own professional and psychic survival.[37]

Standing in stark contrast, while also resembling the woman of the Indian captivity myth (and, depending on one's perspective, only slightly worse off than the pliant and oppressed angel in the house), was the rigid and repressed spinster, a term which came into common use during the early 19th century, and which continued far longer in terms of actual usage than that of the angel. Although it originated with her so-called occupation – when the mindless and repetitive task of spinning cloth was given to unmarried women as a way for them to earn their keep in the home and prevent them from being a financial burden to a family – the stereotype of the loveless, childless and lonely spinster, incomplete, colourless and severe, relegated to the fringes of society, financially dependent on a father or male relative, and expected to be as selfless as the angel in the house, infiltrated the collective consciousness with the same potency as her married angel-sister, even though the spinster's uncomfortable unproductive middle-aged existence paled in comparison to the glowing and elevated (and reproductive) angel of hearth and home.

Unfortunately for the unmarried woman beyond a certain socially-determined acceptable age, there was an historical uneasiness inspired by the single witch-like spinster, commonly depicted in the iconography as living with her cats or "familiars," so much so that the term "became a scare-word;" and her very existence viewed as abnormal, "… enough to throw into question the rules and presumed priorities on which society was founded."[38] Controlled by a social order that feared her outsider status (since she offered an alternative reality to the preferred model of marriage and motherhood), the stereotype of the spinster that was perpetuated in the popular culture served to both intimidate and discourage other women from straying from the norm, starting in early childhood. The Victorian invention and popularity of the card game *Old Maid,* which still exists today as a children's game, solidified the archetype in the collective consciousness by depicting either plain or downright grotesque caricatures of what the typical spinster looked like, and underscoring an ominous cultural message – to be left holding the old maid card was to lose the game.

Another significant aspect of the spinster, in spite of the term's obviously feminine cast, was her lack of sexual identity. The middle-aged unmarried woman was frequently presented as disturbingly asexual versus the unmarried man, or bachelor, a label which did not hold the same negative connotations and which did not indicate or imply one's sexual status or activity. To further split some cultural gray hairs, there was the general perception that so-called 'old maids' were to be pitied, since they had perhaps once loved and lost or love had passed them by ("always the bridesmaid, never the bride.") The same was not true of the spinster, perceived of collectively as never having expressed an interest in men or sex, perhaps even to the point of suspected "unnatural affections" at times. Looking decidedly unfeminine or asexual in many representations, this only further served to make all spinsters a threat to the social order. "Prolonged virginity" was one thing, but "prolonged singleness [was] suspect."[39]

Nowhere was the stereotype of the grim and barren spinster, living in quiet desperation, more prevalent or historically significant than in the shell-shocked culture of post-Civil War New England, where once again in the collective mind the myth of a national identity had been at stake – and over which the Puritanical darkness of unrelenting self-sacrifice still hung like widow's weeds, feeding off deeply rooted cultural anxieties similar to (though not the same as) those that emerged during the Indian wars east and west. If the social and moral responsibilities of angel-wife and mother were clearly and carefully delineated for middle class women who 'kept' the home and represented a return to domestic stability (however sentimentalized), the spinster existed in a cultural limbo outside the charmed family circle, her social position undefined, her purpose in life vague and subject to suspicion because of it. Even though spinsters were also expected to be caretakers for the sick and dying when the situation required, they did so without the status of wife or mother. They could be school teachers or librarians, perhaps, but the perception was that if they did not conform to certain social expectations within their communities, they would pay the price either emotionally or psychologically, and be as damaged and useless (and potentially dangerous to the status quo) as the rescued or ransomed captives of the Indian wars.
Both in her narrative and the public image she presented at the time of the murders (and still presents), Lizzie Borden was the archetypal spinster/captive, dependent on the whims of her father/captor "for the least little necessities" well into adulthood (or for as long as that father was alive).[40] She was sexless, disempowered, and disengaged, merely existing on the margins of 'normal' society, and an economic burden on both family

and community with murky prospects for any future happiness, especially if left with little or no inheritance. Existing under the circumstances that she did until the age of thirty-two – in a house where all the shutters were fastened tight except on cleaning days and whose doors were always tripled locked, with the key to her father's bedroom placed deliberately on the sitting room mantle (as a warning and a dare aimed specifically at Lizzie).[41] Literally living with the daily visible threat of a shrinking inheritance as embodied by her increasingly corpulent step-mother,[42] Lizzie becomes the beleaguered and hapless woman of the captivity myth – long suffering, victimized, and waiting for salvation.[43] Additional symbolic weight is added if we consider that the house she was trapped in, old-fashioned, plain-looking, uninviting, and always locked up tight, reflected her archetypal sexual identity as well.

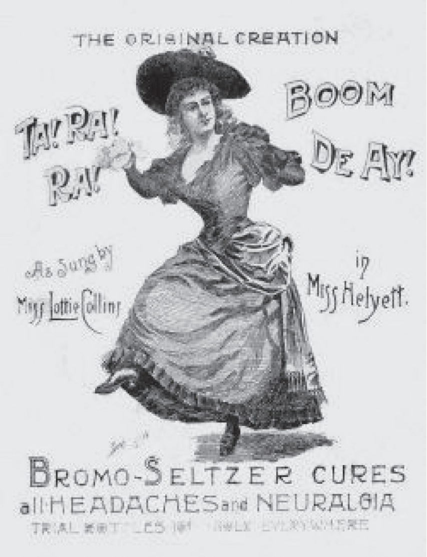
If Lizzie's depiction in the newspapers as the stereotypical spinster carried a great deal of cultural weight, garnering sympathy from some corners, but not in others. The image promoted by her defense attorney of an obedient, loving daughter and ordinary middle-class woman from a typical New England family, also had to have struck a chord with those fathers and husbands whose worst fears would be realized if the angel in the house could turn devil without warning. Many men must have shuddered when they considered that in locking all his doors to secure his property and prevent intruders, Andrew Borden apparently never gave a thought to what he might be locking in. As personified by Lizzie, the New England spinster and the Indian captive, as well as the angel in the house and the devil lurking outside, become indistinguishable.

Today, the question of Lizzie Borden's guilt or innocence remains the sticking point around which all other speculation still spins. Like all myths, understanding her story requires a 'special kind of logic' in order to try to reconcile certain dualities and conflicting cultural assumptions. The freed women captives of the early Puritan narratives made sure to declare their 'innocence' publicly, lest anyone suspect their loyalty to the community or question their cultural (and sexual) identity. In retelling the story of their captivity, they needed to reassure their readers that they had not been violated, out of conscious self-preservation and for unconscious psychic survival. Whether it was true or not, the community needed to accept their story as well, to preserve their faith in the status quo, and the structuring myth of their collective identity.

Ultimately, Lizzie's picture-perfect representation as the stereotypical New England spinster – diffident, socially awkward, and vulnerable – not only reinforced Victorian beliefs about "the whole tribe" of unfortunate unmarried women, ironically, it helped set her free.[44] It was an image that certainly resonated with the jury. So convinced that 'a woman like her' was incapable of committing such violence, they came back with the verdict to acquit in less than an hour. The alternative, of course, for an all male-jury – the idea that an axe-wielding monster in muslin was living within their midst – was the Victorian male's ultimate Freudian nightmare. The image of the disempowered Other rising up and violating the patriarch with savage blows from a primitive weapon, turning both father and home-sweet-home into a bloody mess, had to be rejected, and her innocence, like the myth, preserved.

In the final analysis, the persistence of myth or cultural memory is a curious phenomenon. Just consider the fact that Americans in the 21st century are still familiar with the macabre little narrative that emerged during Lizzie's trial, even though they may not be completely sure how it goes and no one knows its author:

> Lizzie Borden took an axe,
> Gave her mother forty whacks,
> When she saw what she had done,
> She gave her father forty-one.


THE ORIGINAL CREATION
TA! RA! RA!
BOOM DE AY!
As Sung by Miss Lottie Collins
in Miss Helyett.
BROMO-SELTZER CURES
all HEADACHES and NEURALGIA
TRIAL BOTTLES 10¢ SOLD EVERYWHERE

It does not matter that the facts are wrong. The actual number of total whacks was twenty-nine: eighteen for Abby (who did not count enough initially to be included in the murder charge) and eleven for Andrew. For popular poets, the real numbers just did not scan, and for popular myth-artists, the more the gorier. It does not matter that it was a hatchet and not a long-handled axe that was the weapon of choice – again, poetic necessity and the collective urge to turn her name into a 'scare-word' took precedence. It does not really matter that Abby was not Lizzie's mother, but her stepmother (unless you consider it a motive for murder.) And it does not matter that most people today are not likely to know that the deadly rhyme was meant to be sung to a popular tune of the day – "Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay" – which had its own scandalous story and was certainly inappropriate for such a dreadful crime.[45] However, that was exactly the point for staid and settled New Englanders, still living with the ghosts of their Puritan past and reeling from the still-fresh wounds of the Civil War. Even though Lizzie was found not guilty, that did not ultimately translate into innocence, a belief that has persisted ever since, leaving those who hear the story today to also wonder what black-hearted and unnatural instincts or monstrous rage was at work that day in the Borden house.

> IT DOES NOT REALLY MATTER THAT ABBY WAS NOT LIZZIE'S MOTHER, BUT HER STEPMOTHER (UNLESS YOU CONSIDER IT A MOTIVE FOR MURDER.)

What does matter is that the story of Lizzie Borden continues to be told and the rituals of analysis and the assigning of meaning re-enacted, producing in the tradition of American myth-making, a peculiar hybrid of fact and fiction with its own 'special logic.' Her narrative is a reflection of ongoing cultural resentments and ambitions rooted in our collective wilderness, and the myth, like the image of Lizzie herself, continues to evolve. But unlike the central heroic figures in myths of the ancient past, Lizzie Borden does not mediate inherent, disturbing dualities or reconcile us to our collective reality. Instead, she embodies troubling dualities in a much more modern way.[46] Constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed over a century, Lizzie's story continues simultaneously to evoke and pervert the most cherished American myths. She brings the past into the present in a story that has no ending – unless, of course, you want to believe that she got away with murder.

End Notes

1 Collective consciousness is a term coined by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), which refers to the shared beliefs and moral attitudes operating as a unifying force within society.

2 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

3 E. L. Doctorow, *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews,* 8th series, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking, 1988), 229-321.

4 Interview with Oliver Sacks, "Oliver Sacks on Human and Myth-Making," *Big Think*, 7 October 2008. www.bigthink.com/ideas/11842.

5 In their studies of the way people generally tell stories, Labov and Pratt identified six elements that are common to most "natural narratives," defined as narratives not manipulated in a premediated way. The six elements are constant and usually appear in this order: abstract – general purpose of telling the story; orientation – who, what, when, where; complicating action – the event that breaks 'stasis' and therefore initiates the plot of the story; resolution – closure of the plot and return to stasis; evaluation (or reflection) – interpretation of the plot; coda – indication that nothing else important to the story, or its meaning, happened later. From Mary Louise Pratt's summary in *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977) and William Labov's *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (1972), reprinted as "Natural Narrative" in *Text Book: Writing Through Literature,* ed. Robert Scholes, Nancy R. Comley, and Gregory L. Ulmer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 7-11.

6 G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 24; James Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 2.

7 See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984); Sargent Bush, "America's Origin Myth: Remembering Plymouth Rock," *American Literary History* 12:4 (winter 2000): 746.

8 The genesis of the story of young George Washington's mythic honesty has been attributed to Mason Locke Weems, *History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington: With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1918).

9 June O. Patton, "Moonlight and Magnolias in Southern Education: The Black Mammy Memorial Institute," *The Journal of Negro History* 65:2 (spring 1980), 149-55.

10 The list of suspects in the Borden murders has included over the years not only Lizzie, but her older sister, Emma, the Borden's 'kitchen girl' Bridget Sullivan, their mother's brother, Uncle John Morse, or some combination of the above. Also on the list, an ersatz illegitimate son of Andrew Borden who never materialized, a loitering transient, a Portuguese (or Swedish) farmhand, a disgruntled tenant or business partner of Andrew Borden's, and an imaginary axe-wielding maniac escaped from an asylum.

11 According to her trial testimony, the Borden's maid Bridget Sullivan said that just as she let Mr. Borden into the locked house on the morning of the murders, she heard a sinister laugh from the top of the stair landing. Although she could not see who was laughing, she assumed it was "Miss Lizzie," who, according to the timeline of the murders, would have already killed Abby Borden in the guest room.

12 Slotkin, 4.

13 Slotkin, 3.

14 Slotkin, 8. Even though the image of an axe-wielding Lizzie continues to serve the needs of myth, according to the forensic testimony at her trial, the murder weapon was a smaller, though just as deadly, hatchet.

15 One of the earliest books on the Borden case is Edwin H. Porter, *The Fall River Tragedy : A History of the Borden Murders* (Fall River, MA: J. D. Munroe, 1893). According to most accounts, Lizzie Borden tried to buy off the printer and have all copies destroyed before they reached the press, but failed.

16 From the Afterword of *Lolita* found in most editions after the first printing in 1955. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1955).

17 There has been speculation that Lizzie first considered poisoning as a method for murder because she was identified by pharmacist Eli Bence during her trial as having come into his drugstore the day before the murders to buy prussic acid. She was denied the request because she did not have the necessary physician's note to secure such a lethal substance.

18 According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the first known use of the word overkill occurred in 1957. It was coined to describe the obliteration of a target with more nuclear force than required.

19 A renowned American choreographer, DeMille was the niece of famed director Cecil B. DeMille. The Chad Mitchell Trio's popular song, released in 1961, also plays fast and loose with the facts of Lizzie's myth. They refer to her as Elizabeth Borden, but she was christened Lizzie Andrew Borden.

20 The legendary bad meals served at the Borden house have been the subject of much discussion, especially a mutton that made an appearance over several days the week of the murder.

21 The title of Charles and Louise Samuels' pulp paperback account of the Lizzie Borden Case (New York: Fawcett Publication, 1953).

22 From William Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!* (New York: Modern Library, 1936).

23 Slotkin, 94.

24 Some of Hawthorne's best stories involve the mythic journey into or out of the woods. In "Young Goodman Brown," the title character tests his faith by going into the devilish woods and resists Satan (or so he believes) even when everyone in his Puritan community (including his wife, the aptly named Faith) succumbs to darkness and temptation. In "Roger Malvin's Burial," set during

the Indian wars, we see the terrible guilt imposed on a young man who left his fiancée's father to die in the woods, only to mistakenly kill his own son years later in those same woods. Both short stories appear in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846).

25 Slotkin, 57.

26 About two months before the murders, Lizzie Borden's father, angry over suspicions she had stolen inconsequential items from his bedroom, beheaded all of the pet pigeons she kept in the barn.

27 Mary Rowlandson was captured in 1676 near the end of King Philip's War by a group of Narragansett Indians who attacked her settlement at Lancaster. She was ransomed after three months of captivity. Her account, published in 1682, was originally titled *The Soveraignty & Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Commended by her to all that Desire to Know the Lord's Doings to, and Dealings with Her. Especially to her Dear Children and Relations.*

28 Many of the dime novels popular in the 19th century, which featured colourful cover illustrations of sensationalized stories, were written by men who had never been west of the Mississippi.

29 King Philip's War, which pitted the colonists against a group of New England Indian tribes, began in the border settlement at Swansee, which was a stone's throw from Fall River and the place where the Bordens spent their summer holidays during Lizzie's early years.

30 Slotkin, 98.

31 Olive Oatman was abducted at age thirteen by a Native American tribe (most likely the Yavapai people), then sold to the Mojave tribe. She ultimately regained her freedom after five years in captivity. Her story resonated in the press, in great part because of the exotic and prominent blue tattooing of Oatman's face by her captors.

32 Slotkin, 95.

33 One of the reasons the police came to realize that Abby Borden had been killed before her husband was due to the fact that a few veterans of the war knew that the state of her congealed blood indicated that Abby had been dead for several hours. As for bringing the skulls into the courtroom, in spite of its shock value, the tactic backfired. The appalling nature of the exhibit allowed the defendant to counteract the image the prosecution had been trying to create of her as a cold blooded killer. Instead, Lizzie followed the expected and socially-prescribed response for a woman to such horror – she fainted.

34 Lizzie named her house on French Street Maplecroft, which she had chiseled into the front steps.

35 Slotkin, 95.

36 These techniques included the use of fingerprinting in criminal investigations, which started in the U.S. the year of the Borden murders, and the taking of crime scene photographs.

37 From "Professions for Women," an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women's Service on 12 January 1931. It was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942).

38 Molly Haskell, "Paying Homage to the Spinster," *New York Times Magazine,* 8 May 1988, 18.

39 Patricia O'Brien, *The Woman Alone* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), 74. The suspicion that Lizzie was a lesbian also plays a part in the Lizzie Borden mythology. It was rumored that after discovering her sister's shocking dalliance in 1905 with the stage actress, Nance O'Neil, Emma Borden fled the house, leaving Lizzie to inhabit the rest of her spinsterhood in solitary confinement.

40 At her Inquest, Lizzie spoke of her dependence on her father for even the smallest necessities, implying that also meant female-related needs.

41 Andrew Borden began this practice of placing the key to his room in public view to warn Lizzie and let her know that he was aware of her petty thievery. This was before he killed her pigeons.

42 One of the main reasons for the persistent belief in Lizzie's guilt is rooted in the idea that she hated her fleshy stepmother. This is based on the fact that in the years leading up to the murders, Andrew Borden had reduced part of his daughters' inheritance by giving some property to his wife's half-sister, incurring the anger of both daughters who feared that Abby would 'eat up' their father's estate and leave them with nothing.

43 In fact, Lizzie did follow the captivity narrative's pattern in seeking spiritual comfort during her prolonged ordeal, initially through increased attempts at participation in the First Congregational Church in Fall River, and then volunteering as a Sunday School teacher, and treasurer for the Mission and Flower Society.

44 In Louisa May Alcott's wonderfully subversive novella *Behind A Mask, Or, A Woman's Power* (1866), the main character is a scheming actress named Jean Muir who poses as a governess and plays the stereotypical plain and powerless spinster to insinuate herself into the life of an aristocratic English family and gain access to their fortune. One of the sons comments with disdain about her and her "whole tribe," referring to unfortunate unmarried women like the governess.

45 "Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay" was a vaudeville and music hall song introduced in Boston, Massachusetts in *Tuxedo* (1891). The song was best known in the version sung by Lottie Collins in London music halls in 1892. According to reviews at the time, Collins delivered the actual and suggestive verses with deceptive demureness, before launching into her celebrated "kick dance," a kind of cancan. No one knows who paired tune with the Lizzie Borden rhyme.

46 She is certainly not Joseph Campbell's hero, unless you accept that "following her bliss" resulted in double homicide. Campbell, American mythologist and writer, is best known for his work in comparative mythology and comparative religion, especially his analysis of the role of the hero in myth. His philosophy is often summarized by a phrase he made popular in his writing

and lectures, “follow your bliss,” derived from the Upanishads, philosophical texts considered to be an early source of Hindu religion (and misinterpreted by some as a rallying call to hedonism).

About the author

Paula Uruburu, an Associate Professor of English and former Chair of the English Department, is currently the Vice Dean of the School for University Studies at Hofstra. She received her Ph.D. from SUNY Stony Brook in English in 1983 with specializations in American literature, modern drama, and film studies. Her research and teaching interests include Poe, the Gothic and the Grotesque, women's studies (especially Emily Dickinson and Flannery O'Connor), art history, the history of photography, and 19th and 20th century American popular culture. She is the acknowledged expert on "American Eve" Evelyn Nesbit, an icon of the Gilded Age. Dr. Uruburu has acted as a consultant to A&E, PBS, the History Channel, and the Smithsonian Channel. Of Basque-Irish descent, she is a native New Yorker who lives in her haunted 1890 house on the South Shore of Long Island and has always liked the fact that her last name is a palindrome.

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