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The Body that Writes: Gender, Class, and the Abject Female Body in Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013)

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Hannah Kent's debut novel *Burial Rites* (2013) is a historical true-crime novel that recovers the story of a female perpetrator, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, sentenced to death for her part in a gruesome double murder in nineteenth-century Iceland. This article reads Kent's novel, which draws on painstaking research, as a work of feminist revisionism that is part of a genealogy of historical fiction by and about women. This historical fiction seeks to adopt and indeed adapt the true-crime genre for the recovery of historical women's voices from the margins, the best-known example of which remains Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). However, while Kent's work shares many features with Atwood's work, I contend that what sets *Burial Rites* apart from its predecessors is the way Kent skilfully handles Agnes's ambiguous body, a complex territory where social and gender rules are both embraced and rejected, as text. The article consequently models a reading of Kent's true-crime feminist historical fiction via Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Judith Butler's theory of gender performance to reveal how the novel unpicks the workings of gender, class, and sexuality in nineteenth-century Iceland in a bid to retrieve Agnes from historical archival obscurity and restore her as part of feminist historiography.



Hannah Kent's debut novel *Burial Rites* (2013) belongs not only to the genre of contemporary, feminist, historical fiction but also to crime fiction,¹ which, in Rosemary Johnsen's words, creates 'a site where feminist historiography can link women's writing and scholarly practice to political awareness' (2006: 2) regarding gender violence and conflict, between people or citizens and governments. Whether these novels address real historical characters and true crime, as *Burial Rites* does, or imaginary ones, women crime writers, as Johnsen confirms, 'use their research ... and create a powerful but widely accessible statement about women in history' (2006: 9). This is what Kent aims to do here, by using Agnes's body as a site where political and social realities are reflected but also evolve, to offer Agnes her own influential voice. Her body is ambiguous because it both endorses and subverts social and gender rules.

The female body has been 'throughout history' as Rachel Franks contends, 'a contested space' that can be 'conceived of as a commodity ... visualised as a vehicle for reproduction ... as a device for entertainment' (2016: 3), or as in Agnes's case in *Burial Rites*, a site for sensationalism, where the state power debates issues of crime and punishment. Kent offers Agnes a harrowing but ultimately rewarding journey from a disciplined and then abject body to a challenging text that provides Agnes with agency and reassertion into feminist historiography. Agnes's body and the reasons it encapsulates such complexity lead directly to the day of the murders, and therefore I will read this body by drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, demonstrating that their approaches have not lost their relevance in the context of twenty-first century fiction and might offer a productive way of reading other novels in the field of female historical biofiction. This is a sub-genre of women's writing that has been enjoying undiminished popularity as it attempts, in Ariella Van Luyn's words 'to restore these women's voices and their emotional and embodied perspectives to cultural memory' (2019: 67), by representing and exploring historical figures (Janice Galloway's Clara Schumann, Philippa Gregory's Anne Boleyn), and true crime historical figures (Atwood's Grace Marks, Jill Dawson's Edith Thompson).

Contemporary Women's Fiction and Historical Revisionism

History and fiction have always been both closely related and fundamentally separated. Jerome de Groot notes the commonly assumed parasitic role of fiction in this dyad: 'research into historical fiction has been bedevilled by an overriding concern about

¹ See Redhead (2016) for a discussion of *Burial Rites* as Australian rural noir. However, *Burial Rites* is one of three novels included in the article and the critical analysis is limited. See Padmore and Gardiner (2022) for an analysis of the crime element in *Burial Rites*.

the *historicalness* of such work' (emphasis in the original, 2016: 3). De Groot defines 'historical fiction' as both 'inherently contradictory' and 'a tautology ... as all history is fiction' (2016: 3). This means that events can become history if they are selected and placed in sequence by a group of people who possess the advantage of hindsight. This act of chronicling requires not only the accuracy of historical research but also the imagination of fiction and therefore, as Richard Slotkin argues, 'a novelist's portrayal of the past', can be 'truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian' (2005: 222). De Groot pushes this point about truthfulness and accuracy of historical fiction further and critically analyses the ways fiction challenges 'a normative, straightforward, linear, self-proscribing History' (2016: 2). Twenty-first century historical novels, TV series and films, such as 'Ali Smith's *How to be Both* (2014), *Spartacus* (Starz, 2010-3) ... and *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013)' have been criticised 'as excessive ... sensationalist ... cheap or popular', but they 'also open up discursive spaces where ideas about the past, desire ... nationhood, identity ... legitimacy, and historical authority are debated' (De Groot 2016: 2). Historical fiction – both intellectually challenging and commercially rewarding – offers an openness of meaning regarding the facts of history along with the possibility of un-weaving and re-weaving its social, political, and cultural threads to produce a plurality of patterns that re-explore education, work, and sexuality.

Diana Wallace argues that for women writers, in particular, the historical novel has offered the space

to invent ... the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinated people, especially women ... the working classes, Black ... and colonised peoples, and to shape narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history ... the 'historical novel' has offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of 'history' (2005: 2).

These 'more inclusive versions of history' often translate into the freedom female historical writers feel to explore female sexuality as a salient part of human experience, and more specifically 'subjects ... such as contraception, abortion, childbirth and homosexuality' (Wallace 2005: 6).

In this article I want to concentrate on an example of recent women's historical fiction, exploring what Katherine Cooper and Emma Short characterise as 'the rewriting of the historical female figure' as part 'of the ongoing project of feminism' (2012: 14). In doing so, I take as my starting point Wallace's observation that 'gender ... is historically contingent rather than essential. If gender roles are subject to change over time, then they are clearly culturally and socially constructed and open to the possibility of further

change' (2005: 8). This observation, founded in the late eighteenth century by Mary Wollstonecraft and maintained as a salient objective in the second, third and fourth waves of feminism, has been a critical point of departure for many contemporary women authors of historical fiction. Pat Barker and Hilary Mantel, for example, reflect in their work the power politics of the complex constructions of gender, desire, and class, across a range of diverse historical periods. In what follows, I trace how Kent exposes the historical contingency of gender through the painful 'writing' seen on Agnes's body, and the implications of that contingency in *Burial Rites*.²

Situating *Burial Rites*

Burial Rites retells the story of the gruesome murder in 1828 of two men, Natan and Pétur, by two servant girls, Agnes and Sigrídur (Sigga), and a local farmer's son, Fridrik. Sigga's sentence was later mitigated to life imprisonment in a textile prison in Denmark, but Fridrik and Agnes faced death by beheading and were executed on 12 January 1830, the last public execution in Iceland. Iceland's legal system did not include official jails, so while awaiting execution, Agnes was held at the rural home of a middle-ranking state official, Jón Jónsson, where, in Kent's re-imagining and re-writing of the story, Agnes slowly becomes part of the household, bonding especially with Jónsson's wife Margrét and their older daughter Steina. She is also visited by an inexperienced but compassionate Reverend, Thorvardur, 'Tóti', Jónsson, who is Agnes's requested spiritual helper, entrusted to secure her salvation before she is put to death. Tóti represents the compassionate rather than the punitive side of Christianity, so their conversations resemble more the Freudian 'talking cure' than strict religious guidance and a strong relationship develops between them.

Kent arrived for the first time in Iceland in 2002 as a seventeen-year-old exchange student from Adelaide, Australia. This is when she heard about Agnes's story, and she immediately felt a strange affinity with this condemned woman. In 2010 she decided to write a historical novel about Agnes as the creative component of her PhD and spent six months in Iceland conducting archival research but found little information about Agnes. Natan, a famous self-taught doctor and secular freethinker, was visible in the historical records that led to the publication of books and articles,³ unlike Agnes, who, as a working-class maid, was barely visible in the records. When she was mentioned, the views were either contradictory or of the opinion that she was 'an inhumane witch,

² Hannah Kent has established herself as a contemporary historical fiction writer. Her second novel, *The Good People* (2016), is based on a true crime that took place in the south of Ireland in the 1820s. Her third novel, *Devotion*, takes place in early nineteenth century Prussia and was published in October 2021.

³ The titles of seven of these books are included by Kent in a section at the end of the novel entitled 'Author's Note', p. 335.

stirring up murder' (Kent 'Author's Note' 2013a: 335). Agnes's absence is unsurprising. As Prudence Chamberlain observes, 'a number of archives seem lacking in information on women. Much of women's history has [to be] read from the silences and absences that punctuate the narrative of Western history' (2017: 119). Kent's research crafts a new archive for Agnes's body and voice in the form of the novel, and thereby contributes to the contemporary feminist project of archival recovery. Although some 'noteworthy books and articles have been written about the Illugastadir murders, and the life and death of Natan Ketilsson' (Kent 'Author's Note' 2013a: 335), and there is even a 1995 film called *Agnes* that is a loose interpretation of the story and fictively presents Agnes as a devoting mother, Kent's novel is the first and only attempt to allow Agnes to narrate her own story and to lift her from the obscure margins to the visible centre.

The core of the novel is Kent's desire to actively shape Agnes's life beyond what Linda Anderson defines as the 'conventional confinement within the divisions and paradigms of patriarchal thinking' (1990: 131). Kent honours the facts of her rigorous research; however, what is equally important is that she tries to understand Agnes's motives, not simply by filling in the gaps with imaginative digging into the details of her life, but by examining the power structures of class, gender and sexuality that regulated Agnes's behaviour. The result is a complex narrative that includes testimonies from the trial, records from the Ministerial book, letters exchanged between officials such as the District Commissioner and the secretary to the king of Denmark, as well as extracts from sagas and authentic poetry, some of it written by Rósa, Natan's lover before Agnes, and some by Agnes herself, who was an actual poet at the time. This historical and literary material appears in the epigraphs of the thirteen chapters of the novel. The main narrative body of the novel is also multi-layered, with a third person narration that concentrates on Tóti and Margrét's point of view, interspersed by Agnes' compelling first-person narration as she slowly unravels her life story to Tóti and then Margrét. There is also a second first person narration that comprises Agnes's various interior monologues, which form the most lyrical sections of the novel. Kent uses these multiple and sometimes unreliable narrative strategies to reveal the diversity and polyvocality of historical representation. Her unsentimental portrayal of Agnes brings to light a complex picture of her humanity and moral ambiguity.

Kent's narrative structure presents strong similarities to Atwood's narrative structure in *Alias Grace*. Kent has stated in various interviews, including the one she gave to Rich Fahle (2013b), that she was inspired by Atwood's disciplined research for *Alias Grace*, also a historical novel based on true crime. In her article 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Fiction' Atwood explains: 'I felt that, to be fair, I had to represent all points of view ... when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it ... but in ... the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent' (1997: 35) and Kent follows the same

underlying principle in her own novel. However, although both authors approach the same issues of feminist revisionism and historiography, there are differences between the two novels. Grace's historical and geographical background is 1820s–1890s Ireland and Canada, whilst Agnes's is 1790s–1830s Iceland. Grace is sixteen when she is accused of the double murder, whilst Agnes is thirty-three. Grace's willing listener, Dr Simon Jordan, is invented by Atwood, whilst Reverend Tóti is an historical person and Agnes's real spiritual advisor. Grace receives a life sentence and eventually a pardon, after twenty-eight years and ten months in prison. She is escorted to New York by the prison warden and his daughter, where she disappears into anonymity, so Atwood invents an ending for her. Agnes receives a death sentence by public beheading and Kent's novel finishes with the scene of execution, so Agnes's final fate is much less ambiguous than Grace's. Atwood uses the names and designs of quilt patterns to frame her fifteen chapters, and these reflect the silent female language of sewing and how Grace, as an excellent seamstress, sews together her own story both for Dr Jordan and for the readers of the novel. There is a clear departure here for Kent's novel; it is not the quilt names and patterns but Agnes's own body that works as text: 'I know I am rank. I am scabbed with dirt and ... blood, sweat, oil ... Still ... it's better ... to be going somewhere instead of rotting slowly in a room, like a body is a coffin' (2013a: 34, 36). Agnes's body is abject because it transgresses the boundaries of inside and outside as a result of the torture it has been submitted to at the hands of the state. Once this torturous marking is exposed to Margrét and Tóti, the process of giving voice to the previously voiceless Agnes starts and reveals other transgressions that lead to a multiplicity of truths regarding the night of double murder and arson. Margrét and Tóti, Agnes's attentive listeners, cannot help but experience ambiguous feelings of disgust and fear after they have been close to or seen the naked form of Agnes's abject body and react with both retribution and pity, feelings that throw their initial opinion of the murderess into confusion.

My research will build on current exploration of *Burial Rites* as a novel of feminist revisionism that reinserts Agnes back into history, which was conducted by Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir in 2020. Ágústsdóttir looks at the novel as speculative biography and analyses the importance of the Icelandic landscape. Kent does not simply present an alternative to the story, a move which often, as Clare Hemmings argues, does not 'make a dent in the relentless persuasiveness of the presumed' (2011: 20), the presumed being in this case that Agnes killed Natan out of spite and jealousy. Instead, Kent identifies and explores the socio-political context that initially secures the dominant story of the double murder with the intention to present an unsettling narrative that does not necessarily need closure. Central to this narrative is the corporeal: as Elizabeth Grosz contends, 'Every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence. It is possible to construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual and social

body' (1994: 142). It is the story that is written on her body that initially gives Agnes a voice so that she can articulate her own narrative and re-emerge into history as an independent subject. As soon as Margrét sees Agnes's suffering body, her ideas about Agnes's monstrous femininity are thrown into confusion and she becomes instantly curious about the possibility of another story, one that only Agnes can narrate.

Agnes's body is her last resource as a site of protest against her exclusion from historical archives and Kent uses it in order to 'tell alternative stories that ... endeavour to reinsert' Agnes 'into historical record ... as part of enriching feminist historiography' (Hemmings, 2011: 13), connecting past and present, the historical period of the novel (1820s) to the moment of its publication in 2013. Kent dramatizes a challenging ambiguity as Agnes's body is both controlled and unruly, mirroring Kent's recuperative feminist historical fiction, which seeks to challenge patriarchal representations of history. In analysing Agnes's disciplined and abject body I draw on Michel Foucault's theory on disciplining bodies in prison, and, as mentioned before, Kristeva's theory of abjection and Butler's theory of gender performance in relation to murder and femininity. I will discuss the kind of performance Agnes's body gives in both its disciplined and abject form and how this performance relates to gender, class, sexuality, and Icelandic identity.⁴

Agnes's Historical Context

The ghastly double murder and arson at the heart of Kent's novel has left such a lasting impression on the Icelandic collective soul that on 9 September 2017, Agnes got a

mock trial arranged by the Icelandic Legal Society ... with the result that Agnes was sentenced to 14 years in prison instead of death. According to David Þór, one of the mock court's three judges and a real former judge at the European Court of Human Rights, the original trial didn't attempt to answer why the murders occurred (Vatomsky 2018: 5).

A modern court would try to understand the motivation behind the murders, especially in relation to Natan's indisputable power over Agnes and Sigga. The Icelandic nineteenth-century court only saw the illegitimate spinster, literate and clever, with ideas above her station regarding love and marriage, all features that made her the ideal scapegoat and perpetrator for this double murder for the state.

⁴ The novel has been very popular with the reading public and with the academia, set on modules in Australia since 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i01iSNJEvSY>). There have been a book chapter and two academic journal articles on it that explore its use of Icelandic history, stereotypes of women and the relationship between the female body and domestic animals. See Birns, (2015), Ayuningtyas, (2015) and Petković, (2017).

Kent portrays Agnes as a complex and ambiguous human being, who made the choices she did because there was no other way for her to better her social status: ‘we knew that he [Natan] was in need of a housekeeper ... A new position with a man never short of money? ... where you could be more than just a servant? ... I wanted [this] position more than anything. I didn’t do myself any dishonour’ (2013a: 217). Her personal history of poverty and oppression frames her supposed crime and inclines the reader to be sympathetic towards her, despite the unreliability of both her interior monologues and her narration to Tóti and Margrét. Kent unravels in detail the social circumstances of Agnes’s life. As Anderson explains, ‘women cannot be simply added on to history – expanding the boundaries of historical knowledge empirically – without putting under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place’ (1990: 130). The conceptual limits that need to be put under pressure here are related to questions of gender, class, and sexuality. As far as gender is concerned, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir argues that ‘Diligence, as well as piety and compliance, were considered womanly virtues in nineteenth-century Iceland’ (2017: 16). Meekness, goodness, and purity are qualities that would have been expected of Agnes as a working-class female, domestic servant, but Agnes refuses to be categorised by early nineteenth-century gender discourse and remains defiant and enigmatic: ‘They will see the whore, the madwoman, the murderess ... But they will not see me. I will not be there’ (2013a: 29–30). Furthermore, as Lizzie Seal explains, although there are similarities between women and the murders they commit in different historical periods, it is also important to understand that stories ‘are modified ... according to the era in which they are told. Therefore, a complete and sophisticated analysis of discourses of femininity in unusual cases of women who kill needs to be contextualised in relation to the place and time out of which they emerge’ (2010: 5). *Burial Rites* takes place in nineteenth-century Iceland, and an examination of Agnes’s historical social circumstances sheds light on the reasons, constructed by Kent, that lead to the day of the murders. Indeed, this historical excavation underpins Kent’s approach to retelling Agnes’s story as a form of feminist recovery in the second decade of the twenty-first century and within the context of fourth wave feminism.

Agnes’s mother is an unmarried servant, who, when Agnes is five, gives birth to a son, Jóas, by a different father. The three of them are forced to move from farm to farm, looking for work, shelter, and food. Eventually the family split up because, as Gisli Agust Gunnlaugsson explains,

In nineteenth-century Iceland there were no institutions intended for the care of abandoned or poor children. Families in need of poor relief were split up, and the members not able to work for their maintenance, appropriated among taxpaying

heads of households for an agreed period of time. A considerable proportion of paupers were children or elderly persons (1993: 344).

Agnes is abandoned by her mother at the age of six outside the Kornsó farm. Although she is a pauper, she is treated by Björn and Inga as a foster child, which means that 'she shared the same status within the household as the children of the head of the household' (Magnússon 1995a: 298). Inga teaches Agnes how to read and write psalms and the sagas, a combination that reflects Iceland's Christian and pagan past. Inga and Agnes practise their reading and writing during the *kvöldvaka*, which means 'evening wake'. David Koester argues that *kvöldvaka*

was a period in the evening when household members were awake and working together in the *baðstofa* (main room of the traditional farmhouse) on indoor chores. During this time a member of the household would read aloud ... *kvöldvaka* ... includes not only the reading of the ancient sagas and religious texts ... but also singing ... the chanting of ... ballad poetry, and the telling of news and stories ... The result was that religious and moral instruction, national identity associated with both the Icelandic sagas and the Icelandic language, and obedience to and love for parents were all brought into focus in this traditional activity (1995: 578)



The photograph was taken by the author of the novel, Hannah Kent.

No formal education was available for women until 1874 when the first girls' school was established in Reykjavik (Halldórsdóttir 2017: 21); however, there was another law 'from 1790', according to which, as Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon explains, 'every child was supposed to be able to read as a classification for confirmation' (2010b: 88). All masters had to ensure that members of their households, including the servants, could read and write the catechisms because local priests would often visit farms and check that all members of the family could read from the religious texts. This is illustrated in *Burial Rites* when the priest pays the family at Kornská farm a visit, summons Agnes and finds her 'Very-well spoken. Educated, I should think' (2013a: 231). Therefore, because of the Church and because of the way the long winter evenings were organised in farms in Iceland, with the children being given the choice between 'carding wool, winding yarn off the spindle' (Magnússon 2010b: 90) or studying as an exciting alternative to their difficult lives, there was hardly any illiteracy in Iceland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Given the high levels of literacy, Agnes's love for language and talent as a poet are not unique. As Halldórsdóttir points out, 'the first ... collection of poems by the domestic servant Júlíana Jónsdóttir' was published 'in 1876', however, 'women in Iceland were certainly writing poetry long before that time but it was preserved in oral tradition and manuscripts' (2017: 20). Nonetheless, Agnes's literary talent and ambition make her an easy target for the suspicion and contempt of other working-class people. Tóti discovers this when he goes to check the Ministerial book about Agnes's confirmation: she 'was always fixed on bettering herself. Wanted to get on above her station ... There used to be a poem about her ... Folks were fond of her then ... But she bittered as she grew older ... she had a reputation for a sharp tongue and loose skirts' (2013a: 92). Both Agnes's confirmation and the poem that farm and village folk in Vatnsdalur put together about Agnes in 1825, which appears as an epigraph for chapter nine, are based on archival evidence: 'Leading the way for women / A poet, named for Magnús / His blessed blood flows in her veins: / The good Búrfell – Agnes' (2013a: 223). Kent thus deducts from this that Agnes's intelligence and willingness to break rules regarding gender and class are a reason why people initially admire but ultimately reject and condemn her, as they suspect there are other rules she would be prepared to break to serve her perceived selfish purposes. In an interesting twist of fate, at the age of thirty-four Agnes returns to the Kornská farm, as a convicted murderess waiting for execution.

The Disciplined Body

Burial Rites displays a kind of punishment that, as Foucault argues, prevailed in Western societies until the eighteenth-century and persisted in nineteenth-century

Iceland: punishment as spectacle, so that ‘the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance’ (1995: 57). Thus, the local farmers of the whole area around Kornsó are ordered by the District Commissioner Björn Blöndal, despite the freezing cold conditions, to witness both Agnes and Fridrik’s beheading when the order comes, on 12 January 1830. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault explores the relationship between the body, power, and knowledge: ‘the body is ... directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they ... train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies’ (1995: 25). The inscription of the law on the body brings knowledge of the body’s threshold for pleasure and pain. As Foucault explains, ‘If torture was so strongly embedded in legal practice, it was because it revealed truth and showed the operation of power ... It also made the body of the condemned man the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied’ (1995: 55). In *Burial Rites* we are dealing with a woman, not a man, but her spectacular punishment is related to the manifestation of political power.

Imprisonment and forced labour always include a certain amount of pain that can manifest itself in ‘corporal punishment, solitary confinement’ (Foucault 1995: 16). These practices are present in one of Agnes’s earliest interior monologues, when she is incarcerated in the storeroom of the Stóra-Borg farm:

This is no life; waiting in darkness ... in a room so squalid I have forgotten the smell of fresh air ... the irons pinch my flesh until it bloodies in front of my eyes ... the watchmen ... compassed my body with small violences ... bruises, blossoming like ... black and yellow smoke trapped under the membrane (2013a: 18, 35–6).

These ‘small violences’ escalate to rape, which is tersely mentioned as an ‘incident’ (2013a: 27). Heather Love describes the archive as ‘an encounter with historical violence, which includes both physical injury and the violence of obscurity’ (2007: 49). The physical injuries to which Love refers are the everyday assaults to which women’s bodies are subjected in a patriarchal society, such as the sexual violence that Agnes endures. Agnes explains that a servant girl in the 1820s rural Iceland often had to decide, ‘whether to let a farmer up under her skirts and face the wrath of his wife ... or deny him and find herself homeless in the snow and fog’ (2013a: 178). Love’s ‘the violence of obscurity’ refers to the erasure of experiences like this from historical archives, perpetuating misogynistic sexual violations. By including them, as Kent does in her novel, feminist historical crime fiction draws attention to the historical continuums of sexual harassment and assault.

Later on, when Agnes is tied on a horse after they reach the farm in Kornská, she adds 'rationing of food' (Foucault 1995: 16) and drink to the list of the painful practices inflicted upon her: 'As usual, no one has noticed that I haven't eaten or had a sip of water all day; my lips are as split as firewood' (2013a: 42). Although there is no public torture performed on Agnes's body, the irons, the 'small violences' and the dehumanising deprivation of food and drink amount to torture. Agnes is scarred in private and now, before she gets strapped to the saddle of the horse to be transferred to Kornská, the gathering crowd can read on her filthy, beaten, and broken body the text that the state inflicted on her:

At first I did not know why these people stood about ... staring at me ... Then I understood that it was not me they stared at ... these people did not see me. It was two dead men. It was a burning farm. It was a knife. It was blood ... the silence was broken by a sudden, brief shriek from a child: Fjandi! Devil! It burst into the air like an explosion of water from a geyser (2013a: 35).

The story written on Agnes's body is exposed to the gaze of the public by the legal authorities, who ensure that everybody reads her body as they want them to, not as a suffering human being, but as 'two dead men,' as 'a knife,' as 'blood.' Such a public display of her body also ensures not only that everybody knows Agnes's body is contained under state power, but also that everybody is under surveillance, so they had better not break the law. Blöndal confirms this when Tóti asks him if he means 'to make an example' of Agnes: 'this District is overrun with ... Thieves, thugs and now murderers ... I mean to deliver God's justice here on earth ... honour ... my duty as lawkeeper' (2013a: 172-3). He instructs Tóti to 'apply the Lord's word to her as a whip to a hard-mouthed horse' (2013a: 170), a threatening simile that takes the reader back to Agnes's tortured body but also signals the way for the move from her body to her soul. The judicial system gives Agnes the opportunity to unburden her soul by repenting in a priest's presence. The threat of the executioner is removed, but only temporarily, as Agnes remains a woman condemned to be beheaded. Nevertheless, she can still choose her spiritual advisor. Agnes chooses the young Assistant Reverend Tóti, because she remembers him being kind to her and helping her cross a river a few years previously.

Tóti's feelings towards Agnes occasionally become erotically charged: 'He was aware of her smell, the sweet scent of fresh buttermilk, and a sourness also ... He fought off a sudden compulsion to put her fingers in his mouth' (2013a: 185). However, he does not act on his sporadic impulses; on the contrary, he treats Agnes with kindness, respect, and humanity, 'wrestling with' his 'angel' like the Old Testament figure of

Jacob painted on the fresco in his local church, ‘the man’s face buried against the angel shoulder, his fist full of holy feathers’ (2013a: 50). Tóti is wrestling with his God, his faith, and his own sense of morality in his mission to help Agnes ease the burdens of her soul before her execution: ‘You would like me to speak to you in an ordinary way. And ... you would like me to listen to you?’ (2013a: 98). However, Tóti chooses not to employ God’s word as a ‘whip’ that will only torment Agnes further. He does not expect Agnes to ‘weep at his feet’ (2013a: 98) for her terrible sin but instead he loosens her ‘swollen’ tongue, that could not ‘be moved to form words’ (2013a: 43) by listening to her story and satisfying her narrative desire. This way Tóti offers a welcoming release to a part of Agnes’s otherwise disciplined body.

The Gendered Body

Whilst Agnes’s soul is given the chance to repent, her body is no longer tortured but is still confined. Initially it looks like it is the Kornská farm and its inhabitants that keep Agnes under control, but it is the landscape and the weather, beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Agnes is far too wise to attempt any kind of escape, although she is sometimes left alone in the house, with nobody watching her: ‘I would only be trading one death sentence for another ... The uninhabited places are as cruel as any executioner ... I am the property of the Crown now’ (2013a: 71-2). However, although Agnes is supervised and contained by the landscape and the weather, in the actual farmhouse, as a domestic and field servant, there is no space that is not available to her.

Kirsten Hastrup explores how gender works in space in rural nineteenth-century Iceland, with Reykjavík still ‘a small village of about six hundred people ... in the early 1830s’ (Halldórsdóttir 2017: 7): ‘The fence around the farm and the in-fields virtually separated domesticated nature from the untamed wilderness ... Inside the fence, that is within or around the farmstead itself, man was ... in control of the space. Outside, uncontrolled forces reigned’ (1990: 275-6). Although only men ‘may roam about *outside*’, Icelandic women were ‘not muted’ as the ‘farm, and the social organisation of life there, explicitly contains both male and female aspects’ (Hastrup 1990: 276, emphasis in the original). The housewife became the focal symbol of the farm and was responsible for ‘the preservation of the food, the production of butter and cheese’ that needed to last the household all through the winter as well as the ‘spinning, knitting’ and ‘sewing’ (Halldórsdóttir 2017: 16). Housewives were also in charge of the educational and moral teachings of both their children and their servants, aligning, as Koester explains, ‘The domestic isolation of the household educational system ... with the moral and educational authority of mothers’ (1995: 578). However, although women in nineteenth-century Iceland tried to live their lives according to traditional ideologies

that associate femininity with domesticity, morality and the domestic interior, the rural setting of the country as well as the financial dependency of men on fishing away from home meant that a woman could act as ‘both the farmer and the housewife when her husband is away’ (Halldórsdóttir 2017: 17). When Jón is away Margrét shows Agnes how the farm works, especially the outside space: ‘Margrét takes me across the yard to show me the small plot of lovage and angelica, and then I assist her with the milking of the sheep ... We are weeding ... There is a pleasure to be had in squatting with my skirt bunched about me’ (2013a: 75-6). Therefore, although ‘the wild ... masculine world ... outside the region of the home and the farm’ (Koester 1995: 578) is not accessible to Agnes, she takes pleasure from the farm in Kornsó, which, apart from the kitchen that is rarely visited by men, offers her and all the other women in the house a gender inclusive space, as all rooms and the fields outside the house are porous and open to both men and women.

The rules of class do not apply to the mapping of space in the farm either, as the owners of the farm, their children, their servants, the field hands and even Tóti, when he visits, eat, talk and sleep in the communal area of the *baðstofa*. However, although the state thinks they now have Agnes defined (murderess), categorised (working-class female servant) and squeezed into her previous space as a work maid, until her execution date is decided, Agnes does not allow herself to be defined by any category. She displays her resistance by returning Margrét’s stare and therefore the stare of the state, in the first chance that she has: ‘Her heart jumped into her mouth. In the dim recess of the *badstofa*, Agnes lay on her side, calmly watching Margrét’ (2013a: 55). What is paradoxical here is that by torturing Agnes’s body privately and displaying the result of this torture publicly Kent represents the state as aiming for a disciplined body under its control and, to a certain extent, accomplishing this aim. The result of torture, though, is also an out-of-control body, an abject body that allows Agnes to express both her own complexity and the complexity of the situation she finds herself in because of her gender and class.

The Abject Body as Text

In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva defines the abject as something that exists between the subject and the object, the inside and the outside, and yet cannot be identified with either. It upsets and defies order. Bodily fluids such as vomit, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, pus, and faeces are abject because they cross the corporeal boundaries that turn the inside of the body out. In Kristeva’s words: ‘These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being’ (1982: 3). This is how Agnes often

feels, 'like a new corpse fresh dug from the grave' (2013a: 48), echoing Kristeva's characterisation of 'the most sickening of wastes ... The corpse seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life' (1982: 4).

The abject is ambivalent, Kristeva argues, causing both disgust and intense fascination. When Tóti smells Agnes's 'fresh sweat, dried blood and something else between those spread legs', he attributes to her a 'stench peculiar to women' (2013a: 48). The smell of her unruly bodily fluids both repulses and fascinates Tóti, as it does Agnes herself. Likewise, Margrét wants to retch at the smell of Agnes's body, at the sight of her bruises and weeping sores, when she helps Agnes strip and wash. Ironically it is the state in its effort to punish and confine her that causes Agnes's body to transgress its natural boundaries of inside and outside, revealing her suffering to Margrét and telling a story of its own, contradicting the official version of events that comes out of the courtrooms in Hvammur and Copenhagen. Agnes also transgresses essential norms of femininity and class. Butler argues that there are no specific biological or socially constructed features that belong exclusively to either women or men. Women can and often do carry masculine characteristics as do men with feminine characteristics. For Butler 'it is the exception, the strange, that gives us the clue as to how the mundane and taken-for-granted world of sexual meaning is constructed' (1990a: 149). Agnes is 'the exception, the strange', a woman accused of a crime that is socially constructed as antithetical to her gender because, as Seal argues, 'to commit murder is contradictory to femininity and therefore women who kill open up a gap between their actions and normative gender constructions' (2010: 13). Agnes stands in that gap, not only with her polluted abject body that she cannot contain, but also with her crossing of gender and class boundaries. In Kristeva's words, disgust is not enough to cause the feeling of abjection, fear must also be present, caused by something or someone 'sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles ... a friend who stabs you' (1982: 4). This is the image that in the text the small and rural Icelandic society projects onto Agnes.

Despite these social prejudices about Agnes's morality, she exceeds stereotypical notions of femininity and class as she possesses an 'excellent intellect' (2013a: 95). She is aware of the reasons behind the authorities' decision to start an appeal for the sixteen-year-old Sigga but not for her. As she explains to Toti:

All my life people thought I was too clever ... That's exactly why they don't pity me ... But Sigga is dumb and pretty and young, and that is why they don't want to see her die ... If I was young and simple-minded, do you think everyone would be pointing the finger at me? No. They'd blame it on Fridrik, saying he overpowered us (2013a: 132).

Agnes demonstrates here that her local community think of her as other, because of her cleverness and ambition for social mobility, whilst the socially acceptable representation of femininity is manifested in the beauty, sweetness, and foolishness of Sigga. Even Agnes's appearance attracts feelings of both bewilderment and fascination from the other characters as she possesses an unconventional beauty. Margrét describes her as 'neither ugly nor a beauty. Striking perhaps ... very slender ... Unusual hair ... So long, so dark in colour ... the woman's eyes ... seemed ... too light a shade to be considered pretty' (2013a: 52-4). Therefore, Agnes's expected performativity, to borrow Butler's term, of gender and class, is not 'a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a series of norms' (1993b: 12). Agnes's body fails 'to materialise' according to these social norms, which means that it provides 'the necessary "outside," if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materialising the norm, qualify as bodies that matter' (1993b: 16). Sigga's body matters because she performs her gender and class according to expected social rules, whilst Agnes does not and therefore her body, 'abjected and delegitimated' fails 'to count as' a body (Butler 1993b: 15). Agnes's life is not worth saving, even though according to Kent's convincing interpretation of the historical double murder Agnes is guilty of involuntary manslaughter only in relation to Natan (2013a: 302-3). Kent demonstrates here the complex notion that Agnes's refusal to perform established and monitored gender and class norms is a major contributing factor to the order for her execution. As Seal explains, women who kill today in a similar way to Agnes 'unsettle ... norms ... of femininity, such as nurturance, gentleness and social conformity' (2010: 1). Although Agnes is what De Groot defines as 'the alien', 'the historical other ... [she] is also (in historical fictions) made recognizable, a distorted reflection' (2016: 214) that connects the past to the present by making women who commit murder today part of a historical continuum. Agnes's recuperation from obscurity and inclusion according to the principles of feminist historiography exposes and challenges a patriarchal pattern that perpetuates closed versions of history and disadvantages women.

Agnes also transgresses the nineteenth-century myth of the model woman, a myth that is common in Iceland and the rest of Europe, by not becoming a mother. 'The poetic imagery of Iceland as woman and mother' (1995: 580) becomes a symbol, as Koester explains, of nationalism and desire for independence from Denmark in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Agnes knows that she will never become this mother because after the starvation, torture, and rape that she suffers at the hands of her male captors in Stóra-Borg, she no longer has periods: 'I have stopped bleeding. I am no longer a woman' (2013a: 42). However, the childless Agnes surprises everyone in Kornsó by revealing herself to be a healer and a skilful midwife: 'Agnes ... told Róslín to lie down on the floor, and remained by her side throughout the ordeal ... She had stroked Róslín

with those slender palms of hers, soothing her ... The baby had come in breech, like Agnes said' (2013a: 200). A pauper, a maidservant, a housekeeper, a woman in love, a murderess, a healer, a poet, Agnes is represented as an astonishing shapeshifter, who manages to question the nineteenth-century social rules that contribute to her sitting on the margins of the law. Although she is silenced after the trial, where she feels that the officials 'plucked at my words like birds ... with cocked heads and sharp mouths, looking for guilt like berries on a bush' (2013a: 100) she heals her anguished relationship with language as she narrates her own story to Tóti and Margrét.

As a final act of linguistic power and defiance, Agnes changes her surname from Magnúsdóttir (daughter of Magnus) to Jónsdóttir (daughter of Jon), as her real father is not the unmarried servant who worked on the farm at the same time as her mother, but the married owner of the farm. Butler points out that 'the performative power of the name ... cannot be isolated from the paternal economy within which it operates, and the power-differential between the sexes that it institutes and serves' (1993b: 216). Although the patronymic usually perpetuates a patriarchal society, where women can be defined as products of exchange between fathers and husbands, here it promises social mobility for Agnes, and a different future that she could have had as a daughter of a rich farmer, born within marriage:

Agnes Jónsdóttir. She sounds like the woman I should have been. A housekeeper in a croft that overlooks the valley, with a husband by her side and a kip of children to help sing home the sheep at twilight ... Born into a family that would not be ripped apart by poverty' (2013a: 232).

Once again Kent foregrounds the importance of class, and the life Agnes cannot have because of her poverty. However, by narrating Agnes's story through a multitude of voices Kent disrupts any definitive, closed view of her. Her tortured abject body, which transgresses the boundaries of inside and outside, both confirms and undermines the power of the state. It confirms it because the violent use of Agnes's body disciplines not only Agnes but all the inhabitants of her rural Icelandic district by exposing it to their gaze and turning it into an instrument for imposing absolute obedience to the Icelandic law. After Agnes's abject body becomes a terrifying public spectacle at the onset of her departure from her first state confinement, the brutality of the law is again painfully written on her body when she reaches the site of her execution and loses control of her bowels as observed by Tóti: 'he smelt the hot stench of urine ... "Don't let go", she whimpered ... he hauled her out of the snow ... He ignored the smell of shit. "I've got you"' (2013a: 325, 327). Once more, her abject body, exposed to the public eye, is used

to teach the rest a lesson, as Blöndal forces all the local farmers to attend the execution, despite the cold bitterness of the wintry Icelandic morning.

However, her abject body also functions in the text to undermine the power of the state; the violent social inscription on Agnes's body, demonstrated by the painful and disturbing leakage of her orifices, renders her body as a text to be read and understood as a site that opens space for interpretations that consider the class, gender, and sexuality dynamics at play in the murder and its consequences:

The woman's body was a terrain of abuse ... Some of the ... sores had broken and wept ... There was a yellow bruise that spread from her chin down to the side of her neck ... "This woman has been beaten." The officer searched Margrét's face for amusement, and, finding none, lowered his eyes (2013a: 54, 45).

Tóti and Margrét, the two characters who have close access to Agnes's abject body, read it with a gradual openness to alternative stories and truths. However, it is Agnes who selectively employs her narrative as a means of self-therapy that brings some cathartic relief to her, her audience, and to the readers of the novel.

Once the torture inflicted on Agnes stops and she starts to be nourished with decent food, warm clothes, fresh air, and the company of other people, her body starts to heal. However, the story that her abject, scarred, and leaking body started keeps unfolding. The farm where she is imprisoned before her execution is one of these spaces unrestricted by conventions of gender or class. By moving freely in all the rooms of the farm and in the fields outside the farm Agnes, the deviant individual, becomes less of a marginalised murderess and more of a skilful, unpaid maid. By the end of the narrative all the characters involved in the story and the reading audience 'see' Agnes, as she unravels through free indirect speech, from 'Prisoner? Accused? Condemned?' to 'Agnes' and 'My girl' (2013a: 51, 324). Margrét starts by resenting Agnes's presence but feeling some sympathy for her misfortunes, to consulting her over the running of the farm and the household, to loving her as a daughter and dressing her in beautiful clothes so that she can walk towards her fate with dignity at the end. Agnes is no longer alone or unloved, as Toti holds her hand during her whole ordeal: 'I won't let go of you. God is all around us, Agnes. I won't ever let go' (2013a: 328).

Conclusion

My contention in this article is that Kent unearths, interprets, and adds to an existing historical archive, utilising history and fiction to disturb and rewrite hegemonic representations of women like Agnes. Kent's project here is similar to a feminist

historiographer's who, as Hemmings advises, seeks 'to tell alternative stories that highlight what has been left out and endeavour to reinsert those omissions into historical record' confirming not only 'that there will always be exceptions to the norm of any given historical account, but that these exceptions provide an epistemological challenge to accepted teleologies' (2011: 13). Kent's varied narrative operations, which address the complexity of Agnes's disciplined and abject body as text, succeed in challenging 'accepted teleologies' as she dramatizes Agnes's presence in the story of the double murder not only in relation to the purpose which she serves but also to the social and political reasons behind that purpose. By creating a contemporary archival body for Agnes that becomes part of the story, and disassociating Agnes from binary notions of angel or demon, Kent helps us see another Agnes, one that can be unreliable, morally accountable but also full of empathy and humanity.

The relevance of canonical feminist theory such as Kristeva's on the abject body and Butler's on gender and performance demonstrates that this theory can be utilised again to question and interpret twenty-first century women's historical fiction that has been thriving not only within the European and North American geographical and literary space but on a global scale,⁵ recovering, examining, and re-imagining various and varying historical female figures within specific periods. The re-appropriation of women's history in contemporary historical novels, including true-crime historical novels such as *Burial Rites*, reveals a robust network of feminist counter-narratives that connects with current feminist activism such as #MeToo and *Time's Up*. Contemporary historical fiction writers such as Kent do not only offer escapism or entertainment for the reader, but also active encouragement to search for further knowledge that can lead to political action and contribute to an increasingly emancipated feminist future.

⁵ Some examples of the international status of contemporary women's historical fiction are Aruna Chakravarti's *Jorasanka* (2013, set in India), Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019, set in Ethiopia and Italy) and Kim Soom's *One Left: A Novel* (2020, set in Korea and Japan).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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