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To: Dr. Richard Bell

Patty Cannon in Two Evolutions:
The Transformation of American Literature in the Mid-1800s

On February 1, 1841 Erastus E. Barclay and Clinton Jackson took the *Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon* to the Southern district court of New York City to be copyrighted.¹ Both Barclay and Jackson signed their names to this record and claimed they were both the “proprietors” and “authors” of the *Narrative and Confession*.² This pamphlet told a shocking tale. Lucretia P. Hanly, the daughter of a disgraced son of an English nobleman, moved to Delaware after marrying Alonzo Cannon.³ In Delaware Lucretia’s “real character” was revealed; she poisoned her husband, joined a local gang of slave-traders, kidnapped and resold free Blacks, and murdered men and children.⁴ According to the *Narrative and Confession*, Lucretia was eventually caught, tried, and sentenced to hang, but committed suicide while in jail by taking poison.⁵ On her deathbed, she confessed to eleven murders.⁶

The *Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon*, while being far from factual, represents the product of the combination of two evolutions that took place in America in the mid-1800s, an evolution in publishing and the evolution of crime literature and the “true-crime” genre. During this time period, the production of literature changed, in cost, in quantity, and in theme, resulting in the rise of popular literature that

¹ *Copyright Records*, New York South District Court, Apr. 1840 – May 1841 No. 321 (vol. 143). Available in the Library of Congress. Picture on page 11. Hereafter referred to as *Copyright Records*.

² Ibid.

³ Clinton Jackson and Erastus E. Barclay, *Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon, Who was Tried, Convicted, and Sentenced to be hung at Georgetown, Delaware with Two of Her Accomplices*, (New York, 1841), 8-10. Hereafter referred to as *Narrative*.

⁴ Ibid, 11-12, and 15-16.

⁵ Ibid, 20-22

⁶ Ibid, 22.

was “designed to reach...an extensive, in some cases massive audience of readers.”⁷ The 1841 pamphlet’s printing, advertisement, narrative, and literary themes demonstrate both the rise of the “true-crime” genre, and the techniques used in the mid-1800s to achieve an audience that was not limited by age, gender, or geographic location.

During the early 1800s the publishing industry expanded in both size and output. Technological innovations, such as stereotyping, electrotyping, steam-powered printing presses, and advances in papermaking and bookbinding led to affordable paper, a cheaper printing process, and held opportunities for mass-productions.⁸ The publishing industry also benefited from advancements in engraving, woodcutting, lithography, and other illustrating techniques, which improved in the mid-1800s.⁹ With these improvements more illustrators joined the labor force and illustrations became inexpensive and easily produced.¹⁰ These developments increased the supply of the publishing industry to new levels.

One of the original copies of the *Narrative and Confessions* demonstrates that Barclay and Jackson benefited from this evolution in publishing.¹¹ This 1841 copy has a deckled edge, a rough and untrimmed edge that is a sign of a cheap and affordable papermaking process.¹² The deckled edge, alongside the advancements in printing technology, the improvements illustration techniques, and the increasing number of illustrators in the job market, all reveal that the *Narrative and Confessions*, which

⁷ Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press: 1993), ix.

⁸ Ibid, 36-37.

⁹ Georgia B. Barnhill, “Word and Image” in *A History of the Book in America: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, vol. 2, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 425.

¹⁰ Ibid, 430.

¹¹ Original Copy of *Narrative* available at Library of Congress, Carson Collection.

¹² John Carter, *ABC for Book Collectors*, (New York: Granada Publishing, 1972), 73.

featured two pictures along with 24 pages of text, was inexpensive to produce. As further proof of this inexpensive printing process, the 1841 pamphlet cost the purchaser a mere 12½ cents.¹³ During the 1840s in New York City one could purchase a dozen eggs or a single newspaper for the same price.¹⁴

While the techniques and technologies surrounding publishing changed, the nature of crime literature also evolved. In colonial America, journalism surrounding crime and criminal cases remained relatively minimal, but by the 1800s, newspaper “coverage of crimes and trials became more extensive and sustained, particularly in sensational cases.”¹⁵ By the 1830s, the literary world “was flooded with purely exploitive accounts of real-life horrors,” which developed a popular readership and sold in large quantities.¹⁶ During the mid-1800s, innovations in printing technology created a supply of inexpensive publishing material, while the evolution of crime literature created the demand.¹⁷ It was this environment that bore the *Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon*.

The literature on Patty Cannon, member of the infamous Cannon-Johnson Gang whom the *Narrative and Confessions* is based on, began as factual accounts prior to 1830, shifted towards sensationalism in the late 1830s, and arrived at almost pure fictional “true-crime” with the 1841 *Narrative and Confessions*.¹⁸ The facts of the Patty Cannon case appear to be as follows. Patty Cannon, her husband Jessie Cannon and their

¹³ Hal Roth, *The Monster's Handsome Face: Patty Cannon in Fact and Fiction*, (Maryland: Nanticoke Books, 1998), 6.

¹⁴ For price of eggs, *The Log Cabin*, vol 1, issue 40, New York, September 4, 1841. For price of monthly paper, *The Northern Star and Freemans Advocate*, vol. 1, issue 7, New York, March 3, 1842.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 31.

¹⁶ Harold Schechter, “Introduction,” in *True Crime: An American Anthology*, Harold Schechter ed., (New York: Library of America, 2008), xii.

¹⁷ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 37.

¹⁸ Roth, *The Monster's Handsome Face*, 68.

neighbors Joseph and Ebenezer Johnson kidnapped and resold freed and enslaved blacks from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia.¹⁹ The Cannon-Johnson Gang occasionally used Black men to lure unsuspecting Blacks to be caught.²⁰ Eventually, the members of this Delaware gang were caught and Patty Cannon was indicted on April 13, 1829, yet there seems to be no record of a trial or sentencing, as she died in jail on May 11, 1829.²¹

Newspaper articles during 1829 closely follow the facts of the Patty Cannon case. In March 1829, the African American “Freedom’s Journal” wrote about the kidnappings taking place between the border of Delaware and Maryland perpetrated by the Cannon-Johnson Gang, who used Patty Cannon’s house as a base of operations.²² In early April, an article, entitled “Shocking Depravity” appeared in newspapers in New Hampshire, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, Maryland, and Ohio. This article detailed the discovery of a corpse on a property formerly owned by Patty Cannon, the revelation that Patty had indeed murdered this individual, and informed the reader that Patty was imprisoned in the Georgetown, Delaware jail awaiting trial.²³ After Patty Cannon’s death, newspapers informed readers that the notorious kidnapper had escaped trial as she had died in jail on May 11, 1829.²⁴ These articles demonstrate two important aspects of the evolution of crime literature near 1830. First, they show the rising

¹⁹ Ibid, 2.

²⁰ Ibid, 66.

²¹ Ibid, 78-79.

²² *Freedom's Journal*, New York City, March 7, 1829.

²³ “Shocking Depravity,” *The Farmers' Cabinet*, vol 27 issue 33, New Hampshire, April 25, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *The Watch-Tower*, vol 16 issue 787, New York, April 27, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *Salem Gazette*, vol 7 issue 31, Massachusetts, April 17, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *American Mercury*, vol 46 issue 2338, Connecticut, April 21, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *Providence Patriot*, vol 27 issue 32, Rhode Island, April 22, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *Eastern Argus*, vol 5 issue 467, Maine, April 24, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *Torch Light and Public Advertiser*, Maryland, April 16, 1829. “Shocking Depravity,” *Norwalk Reporter And Huron Advertiser*, Ohio, May 2, 1829.

²⁴ *Baltimore Patriot*, vol 33 issue 123, Maryland, May 22, 1829. *Hagerstown Mail*, Maryland, May 29, 1829. *Newburyport Herald*, Massachusetts, May 30, 1829.

popularity of criminal narratives that “often transcended regional boundaries.”²⁵ Second, these 1829 articles reveal that while journalism following criminal cases was immensely popular, newspapers still remained confined to facts. This however began to change as sensationalist journalism increased in the United States.

By the late 1830s, the story of Patty Cannon shifted from fact towards sensationalism. Articles were tailored to capture the reader’s imagination and often added practical or moral lessons, or claims of truthfulness. For instance, an article in the Salem Gazette began with “The following dreadful narration is given for truth, in a paper of great respectability.”²⁶ A May 6, 1837 article from Maine entitled “Thrilling Disclosures” called Patty Cannon a “She-demon” who was strong enough to single handedly subdue a “stout negro man.”²⁷ A similar article appeared under the title “Kidnappers and Murderers” in Ithaca, New York one day later, which concluded with a warning, for “those who may read the preceding narrative” that the state of Delaware dealt harshly with kidnappers.²⁸ Though less than a decade had passed, the evolution of crime literature had changed Patty Cannon’s story from factual to a popular, sensational and exciting tale.

This change in journalism allowed for the birth of the “true-crime” genre and the production of the 1841 *Narrative and Confessions*. The “true-crime” genre, similar to the “dime novel” and “penny dreadful,” consisted of cheap pamphlets that told of “true confessions,” related shocking crimes, and provided the reader with moral lessons.²⁹ This genre attracted an audience of readers who either identified “with the victims,” or were

²⁵ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 24-5.

²⁶ “Kidnapping,” Salem Gazette, vol 15 issue 44, Massachusetts, June 2, 1837.

²⁷ “Thrilling Disclosures,” *Eastern Argus*, vol 34 issue 1786, Maine, June 6, 1837.

²⁸ “Kidnappers and Murderers,” *The Ithaca Herald*, vol 1 issue 41, New York, June 7, 1837.

²⁹ For “Dime Novel,” Thomas M. McDade, “Lurid Literature of the Last Century: The Publications of E. E. Barclay,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 80 no. 4 (Oct., 1956): 454. For “Penny Dreadful,” Roth, *The Monster’s Handsome Face*, 8.

“moved to pity and terror by their plight,” or readers who felt a sense of justice in the criminal’s capture and demise.³⁰ The works of the “true-crime” genre did not require grounding in facts, as readers purchased these manuscripts for primarily entertainment purposes, rather than information.

The techniques used in the literary themes and advertising of the 1841 pamphlet reveal that the authors intended the *Narrative and Confessions* drew on the “true-crime” genre to appeal their work to a large and all inclusive popular audience. These techniques included claims of authenticity, represented in the titled “Confessions,” and shocking the reader into attention by the use of pictures, such as the engraving of Lucretia Cannon holding a Black infant in a fire, and phrases, such as “The Most Horrible And Shocking Murders...Ever Committed By One Of The Female Sex.”³¹ The authors of the *Narrative and Confession* also stated in their Concluding Remarks that the purpose of this pamphlet was to rescue “misguided youth,” from committing “similar offences.”³² These Concluding Remarks represent a technique used in the mid-1800 by authors and editors to claim, “that they were producing a cautionary literature suitable for the entire family,” in order to attract a broader audience that was not limited by age, gender, or region.³³ The authors even used the name “Lucretia” to represent Lucretia Borgia, an infamous poisoner, as a means for drawing in the large audience familiar with Borgia’s crimes.³⁴ The *Narrative and Confessions* had successfully employed all the literary techniques used by sensationalist journalism and the “true-crime” genre to attract readers.

³⁰ Schechter, “Introduction,” xx.

³¹ *Narrative*, cover page.

³² Ibid, 24.

³³ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 35.

³⁴ Roth, *The Monster’s Handsome Face*, 29.

As another means for attracting a large audience, E. E. Barclay and Clinton Jackson also used broadsides to advertise the *Narrative and Confessions*.³⁵ Broadside were single page announcements or advertisements that were distributed by street peddlers or placed on public walls. Individual broadsides could and did reach a large audience of potential readers.³⁶ Peddlers, selling directly to the public, would advertise door to door, leaving the descriptive broadside, and “returning after a circuit of the street either to pick up the sheets or to sell the pamphlets described.”³⁷ The distribution of advertisements for the *Narrative and Confessions*, like the pamphlet itself, could catch any audience’s attention, drawing on crime literary themes such as claims of authenticity of the confessions, mentioning the authors desire to reach both the young and the old, and pointing out that parents should buy this pamphlet to warn their children, particularly their daughters, to remain on the path of virtue.³⁸

The use of literary and advertising techniques directed at a mass audience demonstrates Barclay and Jackson’s intention in writing and publishing this pamphlet. While some historians have suggested that the *Narrative and Confessions* were written with the intention of endorsing abolitionist sentiments, or were written to specifically reprimand women, this does not appear to be the case.³⁹ Since the 1841 pamphlet was advertised to a large audience, focused on the murder of whites as well as blacks, and was aimed at “rescuing” not just women, but “misguided youth,” it appears the intention in writing and publishing the *Narrative and Confessions* was profit. The pamphlet appears

³⁵ Ibid, 6. For Picture of Broadside see page 12.

³⁶ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 18.

³⁷ McDade, “Lurid Literature of the Last Century,” 454.

³⁸ Roth, *The Monster’s Handsome Face*, 6. For Picture see page #.

³⁹ For Abolitionist, Roth, *The Monster’s Handsome Face*, 30. For Women see, Carole C. Marks, *Moses and the Monster and Miss Anne*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 22, & Dawn Keetley, “Victim and Victimizer: Female Fiends and Unease over Marriage in Antebellum Sensational Fiction,” *American Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Jun., 1999): 347.

as an “effort to capitalize on the sensational story of [Patty Cannon’s] arrest, indictment and death,” through appealing to a large and popular audience.⁴⁰

After examining the purpose of writing and publishing the *Narrative and Confessions*, the intended audience, and how literary and advertising techniques were used to attract a mass audience, one question yet remains: did the *Narrative and Confessions* reach popular readership as Barclay and Jackson desired? In his book *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, Daniel A. Cohen lays out a formula for determining popular readership. According to Cohen, specific claims of readership “are based on a variety of indicators, including prices, number of editions, size of editions, advertisements, and choice of advertising vehicles, diary references or owner signatures, and hints or references within the texts themselves.”⁴¹

By using the information gathered from the previous passages of this paper, we can determine that the *Narrative and Confessions* did reach popular readership. The 1841 pamphlet, as previously stated, was inexpensive to produce and purchase, was advertised door to door and in public settings using captivating broadsides, and was written in a way that attracted a large audience that was not limited by age, sex, or region. At least two editions were published between 1841 and 1842, showing the continued demand for the *Narrative and Confession*.⁴² Even though no marginalia exists on the copy of the *Narrative and Confessions* found in the Library of Congress, this does not mean the pamphlet was unpopular.⁴³ Rather, it points to the fact that the *Narrative and Confessions*

⁴⁰ Ted Giles, *Patty Cannon: Woman of Mystery*, (Easton: The Easton Publishing Company, 1965), 10.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, ix.

⁴² For information on two editions see WorldCat under “*Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon*.”

⁴³ Original Copy of *Narrative* available at Library of Congress, Carson Collection.

was an ephemera piece, written and printed matter not intended to be retained or preserved. This point can also be seen by the publisher's cloth, the paper used as temporary protection for unbound books, covering the original 1841 pamphlet.⁴⁴ This means numerous copies of the *Narrative and Confessions* could have been sold for the purpose of a quick read, rather than for preservation.

Newspapers after 1841 and prior to 1884, the years that the *Narrative and Confessions* was the sole fictional work surrounding the Patty Cannon case also reveal the impact of the *Narrative and Confessions* on popular readership.⁴⁵ An 1873 article entitled "Crime in Delaware," described Patty Cannon's arrest, trial, and conviction, where no evidence of such proceedings exists prior to the 1841 *Narrative and Confessions*.⁴⁶ Articles appeared in Utah and Louisiana, which described Patty Cannon's birth from a disgraced Englishman, poisoning of her husband, and murder of eleven people, "facts" only included in the 1841 pamphlet.⁴⁷ An article entitled "A Modern Borgia," clearly influenced by the *Narrative and Confessions*, even appeared in Canada. This article followed the exact plot line of the 1841 pamphlet, including Patty's poisoning of her husband, her burning of an infant, and her murder of eleven individuals.⁴⁸ While this does not prove that copies of the *Narrative and Confessions* reached these areas, it does demonstrate that the contents of the 1841 pamphlet impacted a large group of readers across different regions, possibly through widespread distribution of the pamphlet or at least by word of mouth.

⁴⁴ For evidence of publisher's cloth see, Original Copy of *Narrative* available at Library of Congress, Carson Collection. For term "publisher's cloth," Carter, *ABC for Book Collectors*, 162-163.

⁴⁵ In 1884 George Alfred Townsend wrote *The Entailed Hat, Or, Patty Cannon's Times*.

⁴⁶ "Crime in Delaware," *Denton Journal*, Maryland, June 7, 1873.

⁴⁷ "Wicked Patty Cannon," *The Salt Lake Weekly Tribune*, Utah, October 14, 1882, & "The Wickedest Woman of the Eastern Shore," *The Daily Picayune*, Louisiana, October 21, 1882.

⁴⁸ "A Modern Borgia," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Manitoba, , October 17, 1882.

The formula used by E. E. Barclay to attain mass readership of the *Narrative and Confessions*, his first work, can also be seen in his future works. Though Clinton Jackson seems to have disappeared from history, Barclay went on to have a long career publishing and possibly authoring “true-crime” literature for the next forty-five years.⁴⁹ Barclay’s works focused on women as either the heroine, such as *Pauline of the Potomac*, as the victim, such as *Sufferings and Horrible Tortures Inflicted on Mortimer Bowers and Sophia Delaplain*, or as the villainess, such as *The Trial of Mrs. Margret Howard*.⁵⁰ Barclay continued to use broadside advertisements, claims of authenticity, and teaching moral lessons in all of these subsequent works.⁵¹ Themes surrounding extraordinary women combined with Barclay’s use of writing and advertising learned from producing the 1841 *Narrative and Confessions*, all served to popularize Barclay’s works and expand the “true-crime” genre.

The *Narrative and Confession of Lucretia P. Cannon*, despite being a work of fiction, is an invaluable example of the changes that took place in print and literature production in the United States during the mid-1800s. This work represents the birth of the “true-crime” genre from sensationalist journalism, the advertising and literary techniques used by authors and publishers to attain popular readership, and the impact technological innovation in printing had on the literary world. Though factual accounts of Patty Cannon are limited, Barclay and Jackson’s *Narrative and Confession of Lucretia P. Cannon* provides us with rich historical insights into the world of 19th Century American literature.

⁴⁹ McDade, “Lurid Literature of the Last Century,” 452-453.

⁵⁰ Ibid, for *Pauline*, 460. For *Sophia Delaplain*, 456. For *Margret Howard*, Erastus E. Barclay *Trial of Mrs. Margret Howard* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1849).

⁵¹ McDade, “Lurid Literature of the Last Century,” 453

Figure 1: 1841 Copyright Records, New York City South District Court

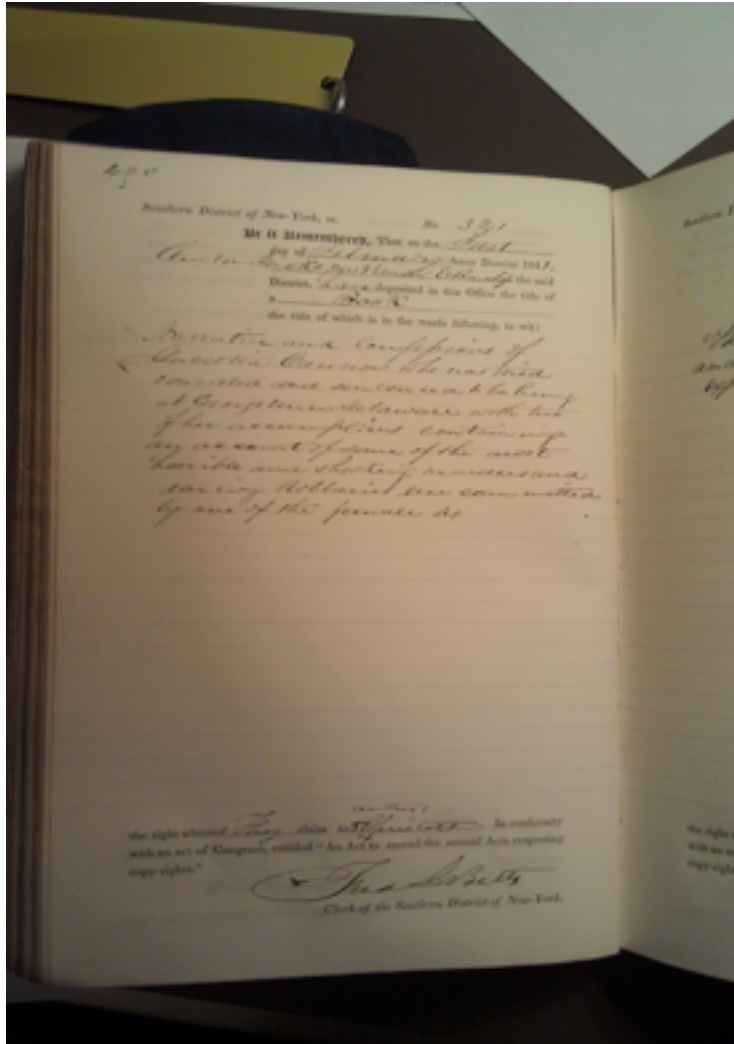


Figure 2: 1841 Broadside Advertisement for the *Narrative and Confessions*

NARRATIVE AND CONFESSIONS
OF
LUCRETIA P. CANNON,
THE FEMALE MURDERER.



See Narrative, Page 13.

Just Published the thrilling and interesting Narrative and Confession of **Lucretia P. Cannon, the Female Murderer**, who was a short time since, with two of her Accomplices were tried, condemned, and sentenced to be hung at Georgetown, Delaware, for the commission of several of the most Atrocious, Barbarous and Inhuman murders ever committed by one of the Female Sex, which Sex has always been esteemed as having a higher regard for virtue, and a far greater aversion to acts of barbarity, even in the most abandoned of the Sex, than is generally found in men of the same class. And we may truly say that we have never seen recorded a greater instance of moral depravity, so utterly regardless of every feeling which should inhabit the human breast, as the one it becomes our painful lot to lay before our readers in the accounts of **Lucretia P. Cannon**, the subject of this truly interesting narrative.

It will be found by the Confession of this ill-fated woman that she has committed eleven murders with her own hands, besides being accessory to more than a dozen others, the accounts of which will be found in the Narrative. Also, the confession of one of her accomplices, who was afterwards executed for Murder, at Cambridge, Maryland.

As many of the circumstances related in this Narrative are doubtless still fresh in the minds of many of our readers who have been eye-witnesses of the facts, it is therefore needless to make any comment regarding



See Narrative, Page 16.

the truth of this statement, as the facts are too well substantiated to admit of a doubt: and will be found to be well worth the perusal of all, both old and young. And we trust that no parent having daughters who are young and inexperienced, will fail of purchasing one of these Narratives, that they may take example from the fate of this unfortunate female, and early learn to refrain from all pursuits or pleasures that tend in the least to avert them from the path of virtue.

Price of the Narrative, 12½ Cents.

To be had of the person who will soon call for this paper.