

Common Sense, No Magic: A Case Study of Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century

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What could make an eighteenth-century woman pick a random child, grab it and throw it in the canals of Copenhagen to drown? Was she ruled by the conceptions of contemporary culture and in particular religious or magic ideas? Or are there common human denominators between eighteenth-century women and women of today that allow us to identify psychiatric accounts of such actions? Popular narratives of cultural developments in Nordic societies have often assigned the eighteenth century the role of transition from a pre-enlightened society allowing magic religious explanations and authority, to modern rationality. This general outline can also be observed in studies of so-called suicide murders, that is, women who supposedly committed a murder in order to be executed themselves. However, in the following, a different approach is applied. Using our background in psychiatry and church history as part of the methodological point of departure, we set out to perform an analysis of 21 child murderers from eighteenth-century Copenhagen. With the purpose of pursuing a case study exploring the status of mental disorders in the eighteenth century and the role of religious elements in these cases, we decided to investigate court records from Copenhagen regarding this category of crimes. In addition, we looked to identify trends and developments in these individual cases supporting the general theories of the questions involved.

Theories Regarding Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century

A number of studies on female child murderers in the eighteenth century have already been performed. Building on an article dating from 1937 by the German professor of law, Hellmuth von Weber,¹ scholars such as Arne Jansson, Kathy Stuart, and lately Tyge Krogh² have in different ways proposed and developed the idea

that there is an intimate relation or even causality between female child murderers and religious ideas in the eighteenth century.

Von Weber's original point of departure is the recollection of the Catholic bishop Pierre Daniel Huet (1630–1721). During a journey to Sweden in 1652, he heard a story that he recorded 66 years later in his memoirs. According to Huet, he was told by a reliable source of the execution of a Swedish man sentenced to death for the murder of a four-year-old boy. The man was in good mental health, upright, of good moral character, and easy to get on with ('mente sanus, probus, bene moratus, inter populares satis commodus').³ In broad daylight, the Swedish man seized a four-year-old boy and slit his throat. When captured, the man did not deny his crime nor excuse it. Instead, Huet cites him for announcing that he had used this method in order to die. He declared that he knew no more certain way to salvation than when the soul leaves the body while the senses are intact, the body sound, and the soul is lifted to God by the prayers of pious religious people. Naturally, the Catholic bishop Huet must have felt a strong aversion towards this heretical, murderous Lutheran Swede expressing a strong faith in the possibility of his soul being saved despite his obvious lack of pious works and even with a violation of the fifth commandment on his conscience. The bishop's story could very well be read as part of classic contemporary Catholic anti-Lutheran propaganda illustrating the moral decay and decadence that Protestantism will lead to. An orthodox Lutheran theologian, on the other hand, must find this ordinary layman in the village somewhat crypto-Catholic or heretical, since his arguments for salvation – at least in the bishop's version of the story – do not represent orthodox Lutheran faith in God or mercy in Christ. Rather this man relies strongly on works of pious people's prayers and aid for the salvation of his soul.

However, Weber and later researchers following his analysis do not pay much attention to the theological context and contradictions connected with this source. Instead Weber interprets the Catholic bishop's astonishment as a clear sign 'daß wir hier das erste oder wenigstens ein sehr frühes Auftreten einer Form des Mordes vor uns haben.'⁴ One could say that von Weber technically concludes *ex silentio* when he asserts that this type of murder is an innovation of the seventeenth century since he has no earlier sources on the matter.⁵

Nevertheless, von Weber uses Huet's story of the Swedish villager in 1652 as not only a first but also a paradigmatic example of what he calls an indirect suicide. He continues with a list of 30 cases that he finds in disparate parts of legal literature. Von Weber has not examined the records of the cases himself and the level of detail and accuracy regarding the different cases is heterogeneous, most likely as a result of the literature he uses. The majority of von Weber's cases are from the

eighteenth century, but 20 per cent of them are from the nineteenth century. Most of the cases concern German Protestants, but at least a notable 10 per cent are listed as Catholic; one is a Hussite or a member of the Bohemian Brethren and one concerns an Englishman, presumed Anglican. Von Weber is aware of the scarce and arbitrary character of his collection of cases, and he expresses caution and reservations about representativeness and the reliability of the statistics of his research. But on the basis of his investigations, he concludes that one can establish a phenomenon of murders committed with the motive of the killer being executed himself. He also concludes that there is an increase in these crimes during the eighteenth century – a standpoint for which he finds support from Professor Karl Ferdinand Hommel in a comment on his German translation of Cesare Beccaria from 1778.⁶ Von Weber also mentions the Danish decree from 1767 on melancholic murderers as a proof that the phenomenon was ‘sehr stark in Dänemark verbreitet.’⁷ Curiously enough, von Weber’s own abstracts from the 30 cases reveal that a number of the convicted were sentenced to prison, displaying that the presumed suicidals were far from certain to attain death through this method.

Von Weber connects murder as an indirect means of suicide with ‘ein irrigen Religionsbegriffen,’ namely the idea that a suicide was excluded from heaven and forever damned.⁸ He cites how the Prussian jurist Ernst Ferdinand Klein, known for his work of enlightenment through legal reform, repeatedly turned against and criticized ‘Übertreibungen des orthodoxen Protestantismus.’ One may bear in mind that Klein was educated at the anti-orthodox, pietistic university in Halle, and he considered the connection he observed between crimes committed in order for the offender to be executed as the result of untrue Christianity. In other words, according to Klein and von Weber the root is not religion but false orthodox or folk religious ideas.

Von Weber’s primary interest is not religion but rather the development of crime, society and culture, the latter categories styled in organic terms. He describes the phenomenon of indirect suicide, its rise and decline in order to gain knowledge of the organisms of different cultures or societies in history. He claims indirect suicide to be part of the organism of eighteenth-century culture and the religious ideas of that organism to be the explanation for the indirect suicides. Or as he puts it: ‘Es sind religiöse Vorstellungen, die diese Kriminalität auslösen.’⁹

In other words, von Weber claims an albeit complicated logical link between child murderers of the eighteenth century and a concept of indirect suicide connected to the contemporary popular religious ideas. This fits with the parallel between a decline of the cases of his material and his idea of a general spread of enlightenment and irreligiosity during the last decades of the century.

Arne Jansson continued elements of von Weber's line of thinking in his work on homicide and suicide in early modern Stockholm. Jansson terms the phenomenon suicidal murder, 'that is, those murders which were committed for the purpose of being condemned to death and executed.'¹⁰ His research finds an opposite proportion between a decline in manslaughter and a rise in cases of suicidal murder in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries corresponding to his sociological ideas of a civilizing process. He identifies the typical offender as a single woman living in social isolation,¹¹ and he mentions a decrease in the importance of family, church congregations and occupational society as grounds for an 'increased individuation' and a significant increase in suicidal murders parallel to a contemporary increase in suicide.¹² In other words, he finds that the number of suicidal murders and suicide rose at the same time, and that even though there may be a notable religious conceptual framework present, it is first and foremost the social factors that are the triggering cause.

According to Jansson's statistics on Stockholm, the suicidal murders peaked between 1690 and 1719 – a period when Lutheran orthodoxy was still dominant but the individualism of Lutheran pietism was on the rise. On the basis of a footnote in C. Nyholm's book on the death penalty from 1858 Jansson speaks of 'a fanatical religious teaching known from eighteenth-century Denmark, according to which the killing of an innocent child guaranteed salvation for both the victim and the perpetrator, naturally after the proper rituals furthered repentance for the latter.'¹³ However, Nyholm has no specific reference to the foundation of the alleged fanatical religious teaching. And as mentioned, Jansson's cases from Stockholm appear to peak before pietism spreads. Also, Jansson remarks that there were 'individual cases reported, even during the nineteenth century, as well as in our own time.'¹⁴ This speaks in favour of his own theory of holding social explanations rather than religious fanaticism as the activating cause.

The American historian Kathy Stuart has also worked with cases of indirect suicide but she prefers to call it 'suicide by proxy'.¹⁵ She claims these murders to be an unintended consequence of the social discipline expressed in the death penalty. Her research gives evidence of the existence of suicide by proxy in Catholic and Lutheran areas alike. And she concludes: 'The theological differences in the two confessions' official teachings on suicide and forgiveness of sins did not affect how Catholic and Lutheran common folk reacted to suicide or how perpetrators of suicide by proxy performed their script.'¹⁶ In her view both Catholics and Protestants instrumentalized the criminal justice system of the eighteenth century to meet their own needs.

In 2012 Tyge Krogh published a new addition to the theories on what he labels 'suicide murders' in his book, *A Lutheran Plague*. As suggested by the title Krogh points out Lutheran pietistic religion as the principal cause of the phenomenon. He defines a suicide murder by its motive¹⁷ – which makes it decisive that the murderer has a desire to die. Nevertheless, a number of the examples in Krogh's accounts appear to have a spontaneous or revengeful character.¹⁸ This includes the case of Sidzel Chatarina Sivertsdatter, who killed the child of her employers in 1697 after they treated her badly. She then went to the authorities to give herself up and explained that she committed the crime to cause the parents of the child pain, but Krogh states that Sidzel 'started the Copenhagen suicide murder wave.'¹⁹

Krogh does not require the murderer to have explicit premeditation or a death wish in order to categorize a case as a suicide murder. He settles with one of four characteristics for a suicide murder:²⁰ First, if the murderer states a wish to be executed or gives no reason for the murder. Second, if the murderer has no reason to harm the victim. Third, if the murderer gives him- or herself up or does not try to hide the crime. Fourth, that the authorities consider it a suicide murder. This allows Krogh to classify a total of 83 murders in Copenhagen from 1697–1789 as suicide murders, the killings peaking in the period 1750–1769.

To Krogh suicide is part of the killers' motive but he regards a pietistic desire for salvation to be the proper cause. The soteriology of the different confessions leave the Catholic and Reformed murderer with a less obvious likelihood of salvation for his soul, while the Lutheran theology promises the salvation of even the greatest sinner through the grace of Christ. This along with the dramatic and emotionally charged narratives told in the 'Skillingsviser' or popular ballads lead Krogh to see religious or magical ideas connecting the execution and means to salvation of the soul as the root of the murders. Krogh accentuates the popular understanding of the nature of the execution ceremony as a particular Lutheran motivation. Like Weber, he neglects the Catholic element of faith in works, and the Catholic nature of the hope for a special quality of prayers and help from ordained or pious persons assisting the salvation of the soul of the condemned person.

A number of contradictions and questions arise from the work of Krogh. In several of his cases the murderers do not turn themselves in and some even try to avoid the death penalty by claiming mental instability. This could indicate that not all the murderers in his material were suicidal and that Krogh's criteria for selection of cases are too wide. Another issue concerns the almost consistent lack of evidence of pietistic religious commitment on the part of the murderers

and the absence of explicit religious discourse in the testimonies from the killers themselves. Finally, Krogh mentions that he is aware of the existence of the phenomenon of indirect suicide in Catholic areas. In addition, indirect suicide is known to occur in the seventeenth century and a number of Krogh's own examples predate the spread of pietism in Denmark. At the end of his book, Krogh states himself that the death penalty 'will always attract people with a wish to die' and refers to the case of Jens Nielsen in 1892, who was the last Dane to be executed for a crime committed in peacetime. Nielsen had a clear and explicit wish to be executed but no religious motive. Krogh adds that suicide as a motive for committing murder is also well known in the twentieth century and refers to the work of sociologists who have examined the phenomenon in present-day USA. These murders do not appear to be caused by religious culture in the eighteenth century, nor by a pietistic Lutheran wish for salvation.

Krogh gives an opening for a different explanation. He mentions that it was not until the 1760s that authorities 'allowed a plea of depression to influence the verdict.'²¹ He adds: 'The claims about the mental state of the murderers are sparse and inconclusive, but they may indicate that some of the murderers were people who today would be considered mentally ill. In other words, it could be argued that the murders were the result of an inadequate understanding of mental illness in the eighteenth century.'²² Consequently, it may be fruitful to examine psychiatric elements of the murders.

The Legal Framework

The legal framework regarding these eighteenth-century murders in Copenhagen could be outlined as follows: In the Danish Code of 1683 paragraph 1-19-7 states that if a person is furious ('rasende') or mad ('galind'), he or she can be detained. Paragraph 6-6-1 asserts that a killer should lose his own life, but paragraph 6-6-17 adds that if a homicide is committed in delirium ('vildelse') and fury ('raseri'), the offender should not be punished by death, but a financial compensation should be provided to the family of the victim. Other mental states such as melancholy did not qualify as a suspension of reason or insanity at first.²³

In addition to this legislation, there are three royal decrees of relevance. The first is from 16 October 1697 and concerns offenders who, with the design and intention to kill, have murdered their spouse, their master, their mistress or a child of their employers. It does not mention anything regarding suicidal motives

of the murder. The decree is directed towards murders of a gross character and extends the punishment from simple decapitation so that it also includes additional pinching with red-hot tongs and the loss of the right hand.

The second royal decree of relevance is from 7 February 1749. While the decree from 1697 only affected murderers killing the family of their employer to suffer the punishment additional to the regular death penalty, the new 1749 decree was designed to make the increased punishment applicable to all murderers killing without preceding cause or clear motive. Pinching with red-hot tongs, the right hand cut off by axe before decapitation along with a subsequent humiliating display of the dead body were the means used in this decree to stop or prevent future murders. This decree also introduces restrictions on the execution ritual. The sentenced prisoner is to be decapitated with no ceremony, nor decorative clothing, hat or cap, and is to be driven to the execution on the nightman's dray. This is intended to be an added insult to the punishment with an expected preventive effect.²⁴ In two executive orders known as rescripts to the administrative officials from 12 February 1751 and 22 December 1758, the king admonishes the use of the decree of 1749, and they bear an indirect witness to the reluctance of the authorities to make use of the extended punishments and restricted ceremony.

In 1757 a legal advisor to the king, Henrik Stampe, proposed a radical new approach to the punishments of so-called melancholic murderers. In cases where the murderer had committed the killing in pursuit of an execution, Stampe suggested a dispensation from the fundamental principle of *jus talionis* found in Exodus 21:23–25 as well as the Danish Code of 1683. Instead of losing their lives the convicts should be sentenced to strenuous work, branded and whipped every year on the day of the crime and when death finally caught up with them, their bodies should suffer the humiliating display of a murderer. Time was not yet ripe for Stampe's proposal but in 1767 it finally went through and radically changed the principles of punishments in Denmark-Norway and Iceland,²⁵ thus renewing not only the punishment for this particular type of crime, but also breaking ground for modern principles of punishment in general.²⁶

The legislation bears witness to the phenomenon of indirect suicide. But it does not give any indications as to the extent of the cases. It does give a hint at what the contemporary legislators considered the root of the problem. Stampe's comprehensive text with the 1757 proposal explicitly describes the murderers as 'melancholic and depressed persons,' but it does not have any mention of religion. Nevertheless, as shown above, religion was to become a dominant theme in the research on the phenomenon conducted by modern scholars.

A Renewed Interdisciplinary Approach

Up to now investigations of female murderers in the eighteenth century have been undertaken by people from law and social or cultural history. In order to explore the phenomenon from a new perspective we have used our academic background in psychiatry and church history to analyse source material from some of the cases from Copenhagen. This is done in order to explore what the material can reveal regarding the mental state and the religion of the murderers, and in addition to see how our findings fit with the existing overarching theories or meta-narratives.

Using the detailed court records as a source for creating a clinical hypothesis about the individual in question is a psycho-historic approach that warrants some clarification. Firstly, our approach does not involve any psychoanalytical, biological or specific sociologic theory to interpret the case material. Secondly, our approach does not involve a projection of contemporary, polythetic diagnostic concepts²⁷ onto the statements by the offenders from eighteenth century. The obvious problems of such anachronistic transference have been thoroughly discussed by Lynn Hunt, Thomas A. Kohut, Philip Pomper.²⁸ Instead, we apply somewhat more generic and less volatile mental concepts such as affect, state of mood, delusions and raging madness, some of which were recognized from ancient times,²⁹ mentioned in the Danish Code of 1683 or discussed during the eighteenth century (e.g. the decree of 1767).

We are aware that some of the concepts (e.g. melancholy) had a broader content at least in the early eighteenth century compared to the contemporary concept of depression.³⁰ In eighteenth century, concepts of affects and emotions of the individual were not prevalent outside philosophy,³¹ and the concept of subjective mental life, i.e. clinical phenomenology, was developed after the eighteenth century.³² In our analysis we do presume that the delinquents of the eighteenth century did have emotions and expressed affects, even though these concepts were not scientifically established at the time, at least not at the level of the individual.³³

Our interpretation and retrospective clinical synthesis is not anchored in a specific psychological or biological theory. Instead we rely on the phenomenon-oriented principles advocated by Karl Jaspers in his classic 'General Psychopathology'.³⁴ The court records rarely, if ever, allow for a genuine phenomenological approach, but we have still tried to maintain a non-theory-fixated distance to the empirical material in question. Thus, we had to employ some degree of empathy into the interpretation of events, although we are aware of the difficulties of plac-

ing ourselves inside the experience of people from another segment of society and over the time gap of 300 years.

Nevertheless, to enlarge the field of discussion of crimes and punishment in the eighteenth century, it seems of interest to try to open what Lynn Hunt has called the black box of individual mental states,³⁵ not least when concepts like suicide murders are involved. The alternative would be to leave the individual completely out of the equation of interpreting actions performed and judged by individuals.

The empirical material of this exploratory study comprised 20 cases where females were sentenced for killing a non-newborn child. One case of a male killer was included for clinical reasons. The cases are selected from the list of suicide murderers in Copenhagen established by Tyge Krogh,³⁶ and our material includes nearly half of all Krogh's 48 cases of child murders performed by women during the period 1697–1789. For this exploratory investigation, we did not have the resources to study all cases, and the criterion for selection of cases was that the brief case summaries by Krogh mentioned some features relating to social or mental aspects of the case. Such features also occurred in some of the non-selected cases, however. Hence, we do not consider our selection to be systematically biased. But admittedly, our interest was focused on mental aspects. The issue of suicide as a motive was not a selection criterion (or bias) as this is clearly expressed in some of Krogh's brief summaries and not so explicit in other of the selected cases. Also, the mention of religious aspects, e.g. the devil, remorse, consecrated earth, was not a criterion for selecting or deselecting a case.

The Case Studies

We posed three questions to the selected cases: (1) Did mental aspects appear in the cases, thus allowing for a retrospective clinical hypothesis about the mental state of the offenders? (2) Did theological or religious concepts and arguments appear as a motivation or influence in the court proceedings? (3) Could trends concerning 1 or 2 be identified over the span of the eighteenth century?

If we look briefly at the whole group of 21 child murderers examined, our estimate is that in four cases of long-term confinement to the Spin House or prison, there may have been an existential death wish. In one case, revenge was an explicit motive. In five cases, the killing related to psychogenic affect reactions of acute stress or adjustment disorder; in two cases the delinquent probably suffered from melancholy, i.e. severe depressive disorder and in nine cases mental disorders

such as organic brain disorder, blurred consciousness/amenia, insanity/delusion or personality disorder were probable causative or concomitant motivators for murder. All cases were from Copenhagen, Denmark, and the sampling period of the cases ranges from 1697 to 1772.

Below we have selected six cases to illustrate what is available in the empirical material, as well as to present the practical, methodological approach to describe and evaluate the mental and religious aspects of the cases. Clinically, the selected examples serve to illustrate the main groups of mental disturbances present in the material as a whole: existential death wish (suicide murders), melancholia (depression), affect reaction, two examples of psychotic (delusional) states, and personality disorder. The case presentations mainly follow a common structural scheme: Offence and background, explicit motive, information during court proceedings (mental or religious aspects), legal issues, and comments by the authors.

Existential Death Wish: The Case of Dorthe Pedersdatter

The first category of cases concerns women who express an explicit existential death wish. One of these was processed at the City Court, the Magistrate's Court and the Supreme Court in 1758.³⁷ Dorthe Pedersdatter, previously married to a peasant, was the daughter of peasants and lived in a small provincial town (Løgstør) until she received a long-term sentence at the Spin House (Børnehuset) for theft at the age of 40. On 8 July 1758, 51-year-old Dorthe Pedersdatter cut the throat of a 4-year-old boy inside the Spin House. After the killing she walked directly to the prison madhouse and gave herself up.

As a motive she stated that she had 'these evil thoughts' (of killing someone) because of her long imprisonment. Immediately after the murder she had told the prison master that she felt her long-term imprisonment to be unbearable. The court proceedings did not reveal any signs of anger, revenge or mentally disturbed behaviour, and her mental state was not further elucidated in court. But no religious themes at all are revealed during the court proceedings. Dorthe Pedersdatter was sentenced according to the rescript of 1749, pinching with red-hot tongs, ablation of the right hand, and decapitation and was executed on 11 January 1759.

In this case there is no indication of mental disturbance. If Dorthe Pedersdatter had previously been mentally disturbed this is likely to have been mentioned in court by the defence. Based on the court records it is likely that she did in fact commit the murder in order to terminate her long-term imprisonment, which was

possibly perceived as devoid of any perspective for the future. Thus, this case may be termed an existential suicide murder.

Three cases from 1714, 1744 and 1748 also concern women with long-term sentences, which comprises the same motive structure, and with no convincing indication of macroscopic mental disorder. These women also killed children of other inmates, and with no sign of anger or revenge towards the victim or its family. There was no mention of a religious motive or a pietistic concern for the salvation of the soul in any of these cases, which may all be considered as suicide murders in the sense that the wish to terminate an unbearable situation was the dominant determinant apparent from the court records.

Depression or Melancholia: The Case of Anne Michelsdatter

In a second group of cases, we can identify elements of depression in the behaviour of the murderer. A typical example is the case of Anna Michelsdatter, who was executed 4 December 1714 for cutting the throat of her own 5- or 6-year-old child on 5 January that year.³⁸

Anne Michelsdatter gives no specific motive for her actions. She stated that she and her fiancé came to Copenhagen from Jutland, but they lacked money and she became ill, depressed ('tungsindig'), and stayed in bed for six weeks. She felt weak and depressed, and she explains in court how she experienced that everything she did with her hands was unsuccessful. She then had the thought of killing her child. Later, she said that she was out of her mind and senses, uneasy and tense, otherwise she would not have killed her child.

In court it was documented that Anne Michelsdatter had previously been out of her mind, and the defence argued that she was not yet mentally stable when she committed the crime. The attorney for the prosecution held that she was not insane at the time of the crime even though she had been insane previously.

There was no expressed death wish, and as mentioned above, Anne Michelsdatter subsequently regretted her deed. There were no religious connotations during the court proceedings.

In this case there was strong evidence of previous episodes of insanity, possibly a manic state. At the time of the murder she had been ill, depressed with low self-esteem for weeks, and it is not possible to decide whether her economic worries were part of the reason for her condition or if this was part of her reasoning due to the disturbed mood. A probable hypothesis is that the killing was an expression of her pathological, depressed mood.

The discussion in court included the theme of the time relation between insanity and crime, and the court was not convinced that she was delirious or raging mad at the time of the crime, and hence she was not covered by the exemption in 6-6-17 of the Danish Code. There existed no medical or forensic option to handle cases that were not raging mad, but still severely mentally disordered. This ambiguity concerning cases of melancholy persisted throughout the eighteenth century.

Acute Stress Disorder or Abnormal Single Reaction: The Case of Anna Knudsdatter

On 4 June 1736, 17-year-old Anna Knudsdatter killed a five-year-old girl by cutting her throat, and gave herself up to the police.³⁹ The victim was unknown to her.

Since the age of 13, Anna Knudsdatter had served several landlords as a housemaid, without problems being reported. For two years she had been formally betrothed to the soldier Johan Hunsch, who had promised to marry her. Suddenly, round 2–4 June, he broke his promise, his colonel brusquely sent Anna Knudsdatter out of his office, and Hunsch took away a chagrin coat that was precious to her, and humiliated her verbally. Within a few hours Anna Knudsdatter now ‘became so strange in her head that she did not know herself’, took a knife with the idea of killing whatever child she met, committed the murder and gave herself up to the police. As the specific motive she mentioned desperation because she had been deceived by her fiancé. In court she expressed no explicit wish to die, and none of the witnesses indicated that she was suicidal.

In court the counsel for the defence argued for mental disturbance using the following terms: ‘strange, foolish, insane, strange ideas, tired of life, raging mad, desperate, lacking intent, out of her senses’ and argued that she should be exempted from the death penalty according to article 6-6-17 of the Danish Code of 1683. After the death sentence had been passed, Anna Knudsdatter and her brothers wrote to the King using terms such as ‘insane, raging mad, rashly, desperate, and being urged by the Devil’. All arguments were in vain, but the King finally mitigated the sentence implying the Anna Knudsdatter was only to be pinched by red-hot tongs (‘gloende tænger’) once, before execution. The Devil was not mentioned by Anna Knudsdatter in court, and only adduced in the petition to the King, as a term on the long list of arguments for mitigation, most likely compiled by the defence.

The court proceedings were detailed, very matter-of-fact, and included a thorough discussion of mental issues. Anna Knudsdatter never expressed a death wish, and the term 'tired of life' was only used in the appeal court by the defence attorney, and in the petition, most likely written by him.

This 17-year-old, formerly stable, woman killed a child immediately after what she described in court as being humiliated and losing her life prospects of marriage, as well as valuable goods. As a hypothesis it seems probable that Anna Knudsdatter experienced an acute stress disorder including a transient change of judgement, and constriction of consciousness; i.e. a dissociative reaction of affect. Modern psychiatric literature⁴⁰ describes such cases where a formerly healthy person experienced a strong tension of 'depressive-desperate mood', and feel that 'something dramatic' must happen in order to regain inner equilibrium. Strøm-gren directly points to cases where '...housemaids that are being badly treated by their employer, and feel left alone by God and people, set fire to the house, to get away from there'. This does not imply revenge, or a death wish; it is a dissociative, emotional reaction. Such reactions are sometimes termed 'abnormal single reactions'.⁴¹

In our material there are additional cases of probable acute stress disorder or single abnormal reactions from 1697 (false accusation of theft), 1706 (unable to find a place for her child during a cold winter evening), 1731 (violence and humiliation by her fiancé), and 1759 (left by close friend; possibly emotionally unstable) where the mental condition leading to the child murder similarly developed acutely, without any premeditation.

Considering the eighteenth century context of these cases, it may be added that the psychogenic impact of the life events like those confronting Anna Knudsdatter may have been stronger than it appears today, since in 1736 she may not have an alternative to marriage to ensure an acceptable societal standing. Similarly, in some cases false accusations of theft motivated murder in a state of affect, and it must be noted that theft might lead to long prison sentences, as well as social exclusion.

In the present case, Anna Knudsdatter and the defence attorney listed at least 12 expressions denoting mental disturbance. Thus, the court hearings allowed for a thorough attempt to characterize her condition, even without a medical vocabulary being available. Religious elements were, however, remarkably absent in the testimony to determine events and motives in court, as well as in the verdict and the reasons given for punishment.

Psychotic State: The Case of Margrethe Christensdatter

The following cases comprise examples of further categories of mental disorder by the murderers.

The first was processed at the City Court and the Magistrates' Court and regards Margrethe Christensdatter.⁴² On 19 December 1741 the 23-year-old woman pushed a 9-year-old girl into the canal where she drowned. She knew the child's parents, but there is no indication of motive such as anger or revenge against the victim of her family. In court Margrethe Christensdatter explained that about two weeks before the murder she had dreamed that she would perform a killing. Since then this idea persisted in her mind, and she felt inclined to do it and ended up finally carrying out the dream. During court proceedings it appeared that Margrethe Christensdatter had served as a housemaid in several positions, and that she had left her present position a few weeks earlier without informing her parents who lived in town. She also mentioned that she had injured her hand, which was swollen. Since two weeks before the murder she had slept at her parents' house, but her mother had been worried as she did not show up for two days. Margrethe Christensdatter told in court that she had wandered around to various churches, and walked the streets. Witnesses also reported that she had appeared ruminative and depressed ('tungsindet'), and walked out of the room when her mother asked questions. Margrethe Christensdatter's employers stated that she had appeared somewhat strange ('sær sindet'). She explained herself that she had been to church when the priest had mentioned the missing girl, and she had felt 'loaded with sinister thoughts' ('beladt med tungsindighed'). Some days later she gave herself up to the authorities. She further explained that after the deed she had been very anxious and perplexed ('ængsted og i urolighed'), but initially she felt unable to report to the police.

During the trial Margrethe Christensdatter was asked to elaborate on her motive, both by the prosecution and by her defence attorney, implying that she might have killed to die herself. She repeatedly denied this motive and said: 'no, definitely not', and she then referred to her previous explanation that she got this idea through a dream some weeks earlier. The court overrode the arguments for mental disturbance put forward by the defence, and she was sentenced to death according to the rescript of 1697, even though only murders of employers and their family were the focus of this rescript.

This 23-year-old woman had served in several positions when she got the persistent idea of killing, and left her job. She was described as somewhat mentally strange by her employer. It appears from court proceedings that during a

two-week period prior to the murder, she was restless, in a changed mood, and wandered around in streets and churches. For two days she disappeared, and then came back home, still not telling anyone that she had left her job. During this time, she constantly struggled with the nagging thought of killing.

Clinically there may be several possible explanations for her condition. She may have been in a state of polymorphic psychosis as she describes in detail feeling symptoms such as being restless, uneasy, having delusions, dissociative reactions, difficulty in discriminating between dream and reality, as well as fugue. But she could also be in a mixed state of affective disorder. Theoretically, an alternative explanation is that the swollen lesion on her hand led to an infection, that organically affected her mentally, but there is no strong evidence for this option.

Margrethe Christensdatter did not express a death wish at any time, though she accepted the verdict. It may be noted that after the murder she did not give herself up until several days later after having wandered around town.

There were no specifically religious themes apparent in court, except that the word temptation was mentioned in the description of her intrusive idea of killing. It appeared that Margrethe Christensdatter visited churches several times during her wandering around town, but there is no indication of a religious motive in her own statements or the court records.

Psychotic State, Delusions: The Case of Anna Olsdatter

The 33-year-old Anna Olsdatter killed a four-year-old boy while sentenced to the Spin House or women's prison for a long term.⁴³

She explained herself that during the previous months she had secretly had a stillbirth, kept the dead body for two weeks before secretly disposing of it. Following this she had been placed in the madhouse for a week, and at least since then she had had the idea of killing a child. As the motive for killing the specific victim Anna Olsdatter mentioned that the mother of the child had mocked her the previous summer.

Upon her arrest, Anna Olsdatter gave an incoherent description of events, including the false statement that she was now pregnant. Further, she maintained that the name (Martin Hansen) of the father of her secretly stillborn child was known to everyone in the Spin House. At no time did she indicate a death wish, and there were no traces at all of any religious considerations or references to any of the parties during the trials.

In court, there was no mention of Anna Olsdatter's mental state, and she was given the elaborated sentence of amputation of her right hand and pinching with red-hot tongs before decapitation. This was approved by the King.

Mentally, Anna Olsdatter may have been in a state of post-partum psychosis, with dissociative and depressive features. In our opinion, however, it seems more likely that the stillbirth was a delusional idea, and that Anna Olsdatter was in a state of psychosis during the whole course of events leading up to the murder. One example of her illogical way of reasoning is the statement that everyone knew the name of the dead child's father, when at the same time she explained that the birth was secret, logically implying that her pregnancy must have been secret as well. In principle, it cannot be excluded that she was somewhat mentally retarded, and that might partly explain her strange behaviour and inconsistent explanations, but there is no positive evidence of cognitive disability. There were no traces of religious references in open court. Furthermore, Anna Olsdatter expressed no death wish at all.

Personality Disorder: The Case of Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter

The last category can be illustrated by the case of 17-year-old Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter.⁴⁴ On 26 January 1757 she cut the throat of a three- or four-year-old boy while confined to the Spin House for one year. After the killing she intended to return to the spinning room, but the mother of the child forced her to show where her son was. Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter was then transferred to the madhouse.

Since puberty Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter had behaved indecently, possibly been a prostitute, and behaved in a maladaptive way. She was found guilty of theft and sentenced to the Spin House for a year. She stated that she committed the murder because of maltreatment in the Spin House, and she wanted to put an end to this suffering. A few weeks before the killing she had urged her father to help her out of the Spin House. Several witnesses stated that she was not being treated differently from other inmates.

The defence attorney did not plea mental disturbance, and the court stated that in the light of her one-year confinement her future was not without prospects and thus she had no reason to be tired of her life (*tadium vitæ*), which might have explained a wish to die. The court discussed the concept of *tadium vitæ*, which alludes to melancholy, and stated that a murder *ex tadio vitæ* was a doubly premeditated murder, and thus worse than killing in a state of affect and anger (*in ira sine ulla praemeditatione*). Thus, the court touched upon the question of whether

melancholy was a partial mental disturbance not invalidating a person's judgement, or a state of insanity, and this conceptual ambiguity prevailed in court cases throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁵

A clinical hypothesis about Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter might be that this defiant, promiscuous young woman had a personality disorder, possibly a dissocial and histrionic, or an emotionally unstable personality. The defence abstained from mental arguments, and the ambience of the court's comments may reflect her defiant, outwardly assertive attitude, giving her motive a timbre of 'see what you made me do'. It is not obvious that Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter actually wanted to die. It appears more likely that she had built up a strong emotional tension, and took action simply to bring about a change in her situation. As in some of the other cases, this histrionic delinquent was marginalized at the bottom of society, and this may have been a co-determining factor in her doing something unusually dramatic to be noticed at all. She was sentenced to pinching with red-hot tongs, and loss of her right hand before execution. As in the other cases, court proceedings were detailed, and orientated towards elucidating the actual events. Several witnesses were questioned in addition to Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter herself. There were no supernatural, magical or religious references at all.

In addition to the illustrations presented above, the material comprised several other types of mental disturbance, i.e. mental change over months, possibly syphilitic or epileptic (1711), amnesic state (loss of memory about the crime) (1715, 1747), possibly organic brain disease (1765), chronic mental disorder (1771), recurring insanity, possibly melancholy or delusional ideas (1772). There is no indication of a death wish in any of these cases.

Preliminary Results and Perspectives

As mentioned initially, we put three questions to the material. First, we investigated the appearance of mental aspects in the cases and the possibility of a retrospective clinical hypothesis about the offenders. As illustrated in the six cases, the detailed court records often reveal an explicit interest in establishing the motive of the crime, thus leaving us with a description, or overt indications of the mental state of the offender. The offender and often witnesses were questioned with a somewhat deductive, systematic method. The question of premeditation was important to the court, and in this context mental aspects were discussed in detail in some of the cases. Even though psychiatry was not

yet developed as a professional discipline and the people involved in the cases were not experts, one finds a rather large vocabulary describing the mental condition of the criminals. In many cases, witnesses, judges, and advocates show a genuine interest in exposing a nuanced albeit not scientific understanding of the mental state of the accused.

The second question concerned theological concepts and religious motives or arguments in the court records. Religious motives and transcendent references have, however, proved surprisingly hard to find. Except for questions regarding communion in some cases,⁴⁶ there were very few religious references and few if any traces of any magical or irrational world-view on the part of any of the parties involved. The mentioning of the Devil in one case was not part of the testimony, but was a *post hoc* argument by the attorney.

And thirdly, with regard to trends or developments we found that apart from a couple of references to communion there is no significant change or development in this respect during the 60-year period (1697–1758) of our cases – that is, a period when pietism emerged both within the state administration and among the general public. In five of the 21 cases the killer is questioned about when he or she last took communion (1731, 1736, 1742, 1747, 1757), and only one of them is a Spin House inmate. In the remaining 16 cases there is no mention of the subject. Even though the total number of cases is only 21 and the concern of the matter may seem sporadic, one could trace a chronological pattern, as the subject is absent from 1697–1730, occurs with some regularity in cases of murderers from outside the Spin House from 1731–1757 but disappears from 1758–1772. Despite the obvious limitations of the material, it may bear vague, indirect witness to the spread of pietism in the contemporary culture although not as a triggering cause of the crimes.

Among the cases presented above there was only an explicit death wish in one case (1758), and among the whole material investigated there was a total of four cases where long-term inmates killed children out of a probable wish to die themselves. In four of the cases no death wish was mentioned at all, and in one case (1757) the delinquent probably killed to obtain a change of situation rather than out of a wish to be executed.

Besides the four cases of a probable existential death wish, the other 17 cases comprised a wide range of mental disorders e.g. depression, psychotic states, amnesia, and a group of cases of acute stress reaction/abnormal single reaction of a dissociative (psychogenic) character.

Our data suggest that at least for the present group of (mainly) female child murderers, the background and actuation for killing may be less straightforward

than is implied by cultural historians working with the concept of so-called suicide murders.

In our opinion the mental – and social – aspects and conditions were decisive or at least important co-determinants of the killings. Except for four cases there was no suicide intention, and no pertinent religious motives at all were to be identified from a scrutiny of the court records.

The question of why these women killed a child instead of killing themselves remains open. The obvious answer from this preliminary case study is that very few of them had a consistent wish to die, and that except for a frequently expressed wish to be buried in consecrated ground, religious motives and magical ideas were practically absent. The reason that the killers spelled out that the reason for their affect reactions or irresistible impulses to cut children's throats may have been that children were easy to handle, not dangerous, to some extent 'anonymous' to the killer, and that at the time probably everyone had experience of slaughtering animals by cutting the throat. Further, it cannot be excluded that the high death rate among small children in society in general may have added to perception of the role of children and their value.⁴⁷ In some cases, especially Spin House cases, the marginalized position of the perpetrator may have been a co-determinant for doing something exceedingly dramatic to attract attention, and the victims were the only group with an even lower status, i.e. the small children of other marginalized offenders.

Closing Remarks

The results of our investigation call for a modification of an established theory regarding female child murderers in the eighteenth century.

Although a death wish can be detected in a minority of our cases, the idea of execution as a short cut to salvation is entirely absent as a motive in the court cases at which we have looked. If one were now to argue that the issue of cynical suicide-murder was implicit, 'an invisible elephant in the room' so to speak, then it is surprising that in some cases the elephant so suddenly manifests itself, (e.g., in the talk of *ex tadio vitae* in Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter's and several other cases), and in the case of Margrethe Christensdatter in 1742, where the issue of suicidal intention was openly discussed in court: when asked in court Margrethe Christensdatter herself denied suicidal intent by saying 'no, definitely not', and repeatedly held to her explanation of a dream becoming an intrusive and irresistible impulse to kill. It may be a little surprising that this case is highlighted by Krogh,⁴⁸ as being paradigmatic of suicide murders.

We must conclude that a thorough scrutiny of the source material for these cases points to social and mental rather than religious causative factors for these crimes.

As previously mentioned, there has been debate about the general hermeneutical value of using modern psychological or psychiatric perceptions on individuals of the past. Despite relevant reservations and obvious challenges we would claim that in the cases of female child murderers, modern psychiatry may help provide new and relevant answers. Also, those four of the 21 cases in which we are able to establish a positive existential death wish do not differ significantly from cases of 'suicide by cop' or parallel, and on the face of it irrational, criminal phenomena found in the secular societies of the USA or Europe in our own time.⁴⁹

As an example of a child murder that may resemble the eighteenth century killings, a case from 1997 in Copenhagen may be mentioned. This case comprised a housemaid that killed the 2-year-old twins of her employer, and was unable to provide an explicit motive.⁵⁰ She was not previously recognized as mentally disturbed, and an initial forensic examination identified no major mental disorder. Later she appeared to be psychotic, with bizarre ideation. Had this double murder happened in the eighteenth century she was likely to have been convicted according to the 1697 decree and executed. And as there was no explicit motive of anger or revenge, she might have been included in the meta-concept of suicide murderers. There is a similar Scandinavian case from 2017 (personal communication), but for discretionary reasons we are at present unable to reveal details of the case. These examples are mentioned to illustrate that such tragedies do happen in a completely secular present-day environment, even though these kinds of child murders are less common than in the eighteenth century.

The vast conceptual void between the law and the missing discipline of forensic psychiatry during the eighteenth century leaves space for academics of later times to consider or construct certain general concepts or myths about how this void was filled at the time, e.g. pietistic excesses, magical world views and an inexplicable, morbid attraction to the dramatic staging of executions. Our investigation of individual court cases reveals no trace of these or other mythologies.

Instead, this in-depth case study indicates that court proceedings in the eighteenth century were perfectly 'matter-of-fact', and left considerable space for contextually relevant and socially appropriate reflections in open court. In some cases this also included mental aspects, even in the absence of a defined medical vocabulary. To a large degree, these court proceedings were characterized by 'common sense' throughout the eighteenth century.

In other words, the specialized investigation of the 21 court cases does not bear witness to life in the eighteenth century as an existence generally characterized by a particularly pre-enlightened, enchanted, magical and irrational world view, as assumed in the meta-narratives of the genealogy of modern societies as presented by Hellmuth von Weber, Tyge Krogh, and a variety of twentieth-century cultural historians and sociologists. Instead, one can reach a different conclusion if one tries to open the black box of individual mental states, to borrow the previously mentioned phrase by Lynn Hunt.

Religious beliefs did undoubtedly influence the shaping of the law and the legal framework of living. But the material examined here demonstrates that religious beliefs do not impregnate the proceedings in court or the testimony of ordinary people in what could then – and can now – appear as irrational and mentally ill criminal behaviour. One could ask whether general narratives depicting the world of the pre-enlightenment population as irrational or magical are products of romanticism, or a belief in a specific timing of the idea of progress rather than a rational reading of the material it has left us.

Notes

1. Hellmuth von Weber, 'Selbstmord als Mordmotiv', *Monatsschrift für Kriminalbiologie und Strafrechtsreform*, 28 (1937).
2. Arne Jansson, 'Mörda för att få dö', in Arne Jarrick and Johan Söderberg (ed.) *Människovärdet och makten: Om civiliseringsprocessen i Stockholm 1600–1850* (Stockholm, 1994), p. 21–52; Arne Jansson, *From Swords to Sorrow: Homicide and Suicide in Early Modern Stockholm* (Stockholm, 1998); Kathy Stuart, 'Suicide by Proxy: The Unintended Consequences of Public Executions in Eighteenth-Century Germany', *Central European History*, 41 (2008). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938908000575>; Tyge Krogh, 'Henrettelsens fascination: Om selvmordsmord og statreligiøsitet i 1700-tallet', *Den Jyske Historiker*, 105 (2004); Tyge Krogh, *A Lutheran Plague: Murdering to Die in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 2012).
3. The original Latin text is printed in Weber 1937, p. 161.
4. Weber 1937, p. 161.
5. When von Weber states that the cases seem to disappear around 1800, there could also be a methodological weak point since new classifications of the phenomenon could transfer these cases to mental and medical records rather than legal records.
6. Karl Ferdinand Hommel, *Des Herren Marquis von Beccaria unsterbliches Werk von Verbrechen und Strafen* (Breslau, 1778), § 37, pp. 179.
7. Weber 1937, p. 167.
8. While there are several references to suicide in the Bible (e.g. Samson, Saul and Judas

Iscariot) condemnation is not found in the biblical texts. In the days of early Christianity suicide became associated with martyrdom or heathen stoicism, and as Augustine opposed both he claimed in *De civitate Dei*, that taking any life, including one's own, is a violation of the fifth commandment. Thus as Augustine became an authority throughout the Middle Ages, leading theologians (e.g. Thomas Aquinas) and many societies until modern times have shared his opinion. Also in this matter a theological rupture occurred with the thinking of Martin Luther. Although some of his statements on the subject (found in the uncertain oral *Tischreden*) may seem to be somewhat divided on the subject, his theological argumentation was clear. Luther considered the person committing suicide as a child of God being overwhelmed by the Devil, but since that can happen to any Christian, the suicide was not to be classified confounded or damned as a person. The final break with the medieval view on suicide as a (mortal) sin within mainstream Lutheran theology was instigated by the works of the philosopher and theologian Immanuel Kant. Even though popular belief may have kept the old medieval view, suicide was removed from criminal law in Lutheran countries (e.g. in Prussia as early as 1751, Denmark in 1866) considerably earlier than in predominantly Anglican (England 1961) and Catholic (Ireland 1993) countries, cf. Karl Hoheisel and Anna Christ-Friedrich, 'Suizid', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin, New York, 2001).

9. Weber 1937, p. 177. On page 178 he adds: 'Denn die Tates lagen ja keineswegs im Sinne der religiösen Lehren; sie waren vielmehr Fehlleistungen dieser. Man ist versucht, hier von einer rationalen Zersetzung religiöser Vorstellungen zu sprechen. Denn die Morde hatten mit echt religiöser Haltung nichts zu tun, sondern entsprachen einer veräusserlichenden Auffassung, die an deren Stelle ein kompliziertes und dadurch den Fehler im Ansatz verbergendes Rechenexempel setzte, das durch den Zaun der verbietenden Normen einen Weg zu dem erwünschten vorzeitigen Tode zu weisen schien.'

10. Jansson 1998, p. 49.

11. Jansson 1998, p. 34. Jansson uses Emile Durkheim's sociological approach to suicide when working out his thesis.

12. Jansson 1998, p. 49.

13. Jansson 1998, p. 53. The opus cited by Jansson is supreme court judge Carthon Christoffer Valdemar Nyholm, who speaks in a very unspecific way: 'Det er bekjendt nok, at det var en i forrige Aarhundredes Midte temlig (sic) almindelig udbredt religionssværmærisk Lære, at den sikreste Vei til Salighed var at komme af Dage paa en voldsom Maade, dog maatte det ikke skee ved Slevmord; desaarsag valgte man da at dræbe den Første, den Bedste, dog helst uskyldige Børn og opnaaede saaledes ... med et Slag at skaffe tvende Sjæle Adgang til Himmerig.' C.C.V. Nyholm, *Dødsstraffen efter almindelige Lovgivningsgrundsaetninger og danske Ret* (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 35.

14. Jansson 1998, p. 70.

15. Stuart 2008, p. 414.

16. Stuart 2008, p. 445.

17. Krogh 2012, p. 15.
18. Jeffrey R. Watts, 'Tyge Krogh: A Lutheran Plague', *Church History and Religious Culture*, 93 (2013), 147–148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18712428-13930121>
19. Krogh 2012, p. 27. It is noteworthy that according to Krogh's own statistics he finds only three additional cases in the period 1697–1709.
20. Krogh 2012, p. 16.
21. Krogh 2012, p. 32.
22. Krogh 2012, p. 33.
23. Knud Waaben, *Retspsykiatri og strafferet i historiens lys* (Copenhagen, 1997), p. 22. This is also visible in our own investigations of the 21 cases.
24. Krogh 2012, p. 242.
25. Ditlev Tamm and Morten Kjær, *Henrik Stampe – Enevældens menneskelige ansigt* (Copenhagen, 2013), pp. 30–36; Krogh 2012, pp. 144–51. See also Hans Adserballe, *Fribedsberøvelse og tvang i psykiatrien: Historiske og retspsykiatriske studier med særligt henblik på den danske sindssygelov af 1938* (Risskov, 1977).
26. Tamm and Kjær 2013, p. 30.
27. DSM-5: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, APA. American Psychiatric Publishing 2013. ICD-10: International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 2nd ed. WHO 2003.
28. Lynn Hunt, 'Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Historical Thought', in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (eds.), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Hoboken, 2002), 337–356. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470998748.ch18>; Thomas A. Kohut, 'Psychohistory as History', *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 336–354. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1858137>; Philip Pomper, 'Problems of a Naturalistic Psychohistory', *History and Theory*, 12:4 (1973), 367–388. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504699>
29. Cf. Waaben 1997.
30. Hjalmar Helweg, *Den retslige psykiatri i kort omrids*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen, 1949).
31. G. E. Berrios, *The History of Mental Symptoms* (Cambridge, 1996).
32. Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, (Manchester, 1963).
33. The limited space of this exploratory presentation does not leave space for a detailed discussion of all mentally relevant expressions in the court records; however, such a detailed presentation will be available in Ralf Hemmingsen and Tine Reeh, 'Mentale tilstande hos kvindelige barnemordere i det 18. Århundrede', *Bibliotek for læger* (forthcoming).
34. Ibid.
35. Hunt 2002.
36. Cases were selected on the background of Tyge Krogh's extensive list of so-called suicide murderers, Krogh 2012, pp. 177–211. The selected cases are Sidsel Cathrine Sivertsdatter (1697), Sidsel Hansdatter (1706), Jacob Olsen (1711), Johanne Christensdatter (1714), Anne Michelsdatter (1714), Mette Lauritzdatter (1715), Elemine Olufsdatter (1731), Anne Knudsdatter (1736), Anna Maria Nielsdatter (1737), Margrethe Chris-

tensdatter (1742), Karen Jensdatter (1744), Sidse Andersdatter (1747), Anna Louise Pedersdatter (1748), Anna Olsdatter (1752), Anna Magdalena Jensdatter (1754), Marie Lisbeth Johansdatter (1757), Dorthe Pedersdatter (1758), Anna Andersdatter (1759), Gertrud Jensdatter (1765), Elisabeth Frandsen (1771), and Ulrica Nordberg (1772).

37. We have worked with the accounts of the City Court found in Rgsk. voucher 113–114, Byfogedregnskaber, Københavnske regnskaber, Reviderede regnskaber, RA/Statens Arkiver and also the court records found in Bytingsprotokol p. 36 and 51, Københavns Byting, Landsarkivet for Sjælland, Statens Arkiver. The case is summarized by Krogh 2012, p. 200.

38. To illuminate this case we worked with a vast body of material. Accounts from the City Court found in Rgsk. p. 69 ff., Byfogedregnskaber, Københavnske regnskaber, Reviderede regnskaber, RA/Statens Arkiver. Accounts on the case from the Magistrate's Court are found in Domprotokol Rådstueretten, 17 September 1714, pp. 512–515 and Rådstueprotokollen p. 372 both in Københavns magistrat, Københavns Stadsarkiv. Documents from the case are also found in Indlæg til Sjællandske Tegnelser 1714/471, Danske Kancelli, RA/Statens Arkiver. The case is also mentioned in a broadsheet ballad 'En ny Klage-Vise siunget af en Misæderinde navnlig Johanne Kirstine Christens Datter' in the collection of the Royal Danish Library. Tyge Krogh treats the case as a religious suicide murder in *ibid.*, p. 181.

39. The case was heard at the City Court and the Magistrates' Court. Documents on the case are found in Rgsk. 1736 voucher 187, Byfogedregnskaber, Københavnske regnskaber, Reviderede regnskaber, RA/Statens Arkiver and Indlæg til Sjællandske Tegnelser 1736/333, Danske Kancelli, RA/Statens Arkiver. See also Tyge Krogh, p. 189.

40. Hjalmar Helweg, *Den retslige psykiatri i kort omrids*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen, 1949); Erik Strömngren, *Psykiatri*, 11th ed. (Copenhagen, 1974).

41. *Ibid.*

42. Accounts of this case can be found in Rgsk. 1742 voucher 184, Byfogedregnskaber, Københavnske regnskaber, Reviderede regnskaber, RA/Statens Arkiver; Indlæg til Sjællandske Tegnelser 1742/161, Danske Kancelli, RA/Statens Arkiver. In addition the incident is described in Henrik Gerner, *Nogle mærkværdigheder som angaaer Henric Gerner, hans Vita og fata tillige med nogle efterretninger, som løber ind i samme materie om de evangeliske brødre af den Augsborgske Confession, Unitas Fratrum kaldet* (Copenhagen, 1772), pp. 98–109. Krogh lists the case in Krogh 2012, p. 193.

43. The case is accounted for in Københavns byting, ekstraretsprotokol 1752 p. 372, Landsarkivet for Sjælland/Statens Arkiver; Indlæg til Sjællandske Tegnelser 1752/354, Danske Kancelli, RA/Statens Arkiver; Højesterets voteringsprotokol 1752 p. 194, RA/Statens Arkiver. The case is listed in Krogh 2012, p. 197.

44. Files on this case are found in: Domssager 1757-B39, Den kombinerede ret, RA/Statens Arkiver. It is also listed in *ibid.*, p. 199.

45. E.g. Waaben 1997.

46. The question of communion is raised in the cases of 1731, 1736, 1742, 1747, and 1757.
47. An illustration of how the infant mortality rates (presumably 20–15 per cent did not live to be one year old) left its mark on the perception of children is seen at <http://natmus.dk/historisk-viden/temaer/boern-1660-2000/boernedoedelighed/>.
48. Krogh 2012, pp. 2–4. In addition, as mentioned previously Margrethe Christensdatter did not turn herself in until some time after the crime, which also weakens the impression of her killing as motivated by a wish to be executed.
49. As mentioned, this is also indicated in the works of both Jansson and Krogh.
50. Retslægerådets Årsberetning, 1997, pp. 95–97, J.H. Schulz Grafisk AS.

Summary:

Common Sense, No Magic: A Case Study of Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century

This article presents the results of a psychiatric and church-historical analysis of the substantial court records from 21 cases of female child murderers in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway. We investigated, first, the appearance of mental aspects in the cases and if they allowed for a retrospective clinical hypothesis regarding the mental state of the offender. Second, traces of theological or religious elements and third, trends or developments in the cases from 1697–1758 were considered. After an introduction to the legal framework, we present six cases with mental aspects, comprising existential death wish, depression, acute stress disorder, polymorphic psychosis, psychotic state and personality disorder to illustrate findings regarding the murderers' mental states. Religious elements and developments proved hard to find. The results of the analysis point to social and mental rather than religious causative factors for the murders. To some degree they resemble present-day “suicide by cop” or homicides committed by mentally ill persons. This calls for a modification of the theory of so-called suicide murders and a religious or particularly Lutheran component in this regard. The in-depth analysis indicates that court procedures were perfectly commonsense and included mental aspects but seldom religion – and no magic.

Keywords: Religion and psychiatry; suicide murder; mental disorders; court procedures; female child murderers; mental illness in eighteenth century; Hellmuth von Weber; pietism; Lutheran soteriology