Book Review: Matthew G. Schoenbachler's Murder & Madness

Tiffany Murdock

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Matthew G. Schoenbachler’s self proclaimed aim in *Murder & Madness: The Myth of the Kentucky Tragedy* is to reveal a “probable construction of what happened” amidst the multitude of fabricated newspaper accounts, novels, short stories, and plays attempting to retell one of early America’s most remembered and retold true-crime stories. Schoenbachler employs a variety of primary and secondary sources in his attempt to provide readers with an accurate account of the 1825 murder of Kentucky Statesman, Solomon Porcius Sharp, by Jereboam Orville Beauchamp—contrary to the deceptive romanticized version society has willingly accepted.

Schoenbachler asserts that “the purpose of this book is not to needlessly ‘complicate understanding’ of anything but “rather it is to clarify a series of events already quite complex enough.” He agrees with other historians in their assertion that postmodern history may itself be an oxymoron, going against postmodern thought by asserting that an objective truth from the path exists and some accounts of history more accurately recount that fact than others. Schoenbachler employs the use of “micro-history” in debunking the myth of the “Kentucky Tragedy”—imploring it for a broader understanding of the past as he fits the murder story into the larger landscape of early America in the 1820’s by comparing it to the prevailing social, cultural, and political ways of the time.

Schoenbachler quotes Robert Penn Warren in his synopsis of the madness surrounding the event: “it was so confused and comic and pretentious and sad, and it seems very strange to us...we have what is left,
Shoenbachler agrees with Warren in demanding the truth while understanding its entirety may never be known. His search is hindered from the beginning because even the primary source material is wrought with falsehoods, being fashioned under the politicized relief war of Kentucky in the mid 1820’s. Schoenbachler cites three contradictory documents as the basis for truth behind the murder: the published proceeding of the trial, the Beauchamp’s *Confession*, and Sharps brother’s *A Vindication of Solomon Sharp*. The contradictions found in the documents support Schoenbachler’s premise that “no document is completely reliable” while “every source is not equally dependable”.

The general understanding of the “Kentucky Tragedy” is taken based upon conjectured accounts taken mistakenly at face value by the general public and historians alike - preferring the likely falsehood and sensationalism of the *Confession* as well as the fictional forged *Letters of Ann Cook* over the seemingly more reliable *Vindication* written by Sharp’s brother. Schoenbachler is able to utilize the half truths and half lies (previously taken as fact) in connecting the reader to the history of the event by revealing the “unmistakable imprint of their times”, providing “insight into their era”.

The unveiling of the evidence history left begs the question as to why the majority bought into the fictionalization of the story, believing it to be truth. *Murder and Madness* answers the question by connecting the falsity’s power, adhesiveness, and appeal to the idea of the early American prevailing theme of Romanticism – a theme Schoenbachler notes “that historians have been remarkably disinclined to engage”. He calls the avoidance of the topic peculiar and egregious, that this “counter-enlightenment” may have had more of an impact in its time than did the enlightenment on 18th century America. In quoting May, Schoenbachler attests that its greater impact was due to Romanticism’s ability to “transcend” all areas of the culture. He describes romanticism as the triumph of will over rationality- the individual over socially acceptable ideals of order, stability, and tradition.

Schoenbachler’s investigation of the “Kentucky Tragedy”, specifically the acts and motivations of Ann Cook and Jereboam Beauchamp, reveal one variety of this “multifaceted romanticism”. He reveals fact through a micro-historical exploration of the event, quoting Richard D. Brown to further expound upon this method of “exploring and connecting a wide range of data sources... in which actual people as well as abstract forces shape events”. Schoenbachler labels *Murder & Madness* as “an attempt to provide a analytical narrative” connecting what we know of the “Kentucky Tragedy” with oft historically covered themes of Early America: Westward Expansion, the rise of the novel, and Romanticism. This connection is successful in its shedding of light into the characters or Jereboam and Anna in addition to America’s lack of regard for fact in their affair with the myth.

Schoenbachler describes Beauchamp as a classical Byronic “Anti Hero” who thought himself above any social structures or norms. He likens
Beauchamp to a cavalier who threw off any notions of “proper behaviors” of his day, which contradicted his own fabricated self-assertion of being of a lover of virtue and defender of honor in his self-serving attempt to emulate the ideals of “demonic romanticism” through what Schoenbachler calls an attempt to “daringly transcend the ordinary. He refers to Beauchamp as a symbol representing the youth of early 19th century’s shift away from collective morals and credits these tendencies to the possibility of being a product of his age—an age that “encouraged displays of audacity, willfulness, and aggression.” Murder and Madness depicts Beauchamp’s obsession with the scripting of his own story, one he knew the audience would believe, and one where he was the hero.

Schoenbachler calls his seventeen-year-older wife, Ann Cook, the supporting member and accomplice to his script, a “diminutive fury”, a lover of the written word, who was enamored with seduction novels. The couple’s Confession script portrayed her as a “poor orphan” who was seduced by the evil Sharp thus being robbed of her virtue provides yet another successful exposure by Schoenbachler of how this story is wrought with contradictions-believed because they fit with the entertainment stories of the time, what people wanted to believe as truth. They painted a picture of a character they knew the public would embrace instead of her true character—the anti-cultural female similar to those found in the literature she read—one without restraint, longing for passion and unbridled emotion.

Murder and Madness references Toqueville’s explanation of the social structure where young women ultimately lose the freedom and independence they previously enjoyed when they enter into marriage; Schoenbachler connects this to Ann’s own avoidance of marriage. He described it as but one instance of a larger pattern of defiance, for little of her behavior conformed to the social norms of “proper southern behavior”. He weaves the unconventionality of being thirty five years old, unwed, and pregnant into the larger backdrop of the late 18th century sexual revolution—a “looser” period between the times of Colonial America and the Second Great Awakening.

Schoenbachler displays how the murder itself was carried out in a manner so as to go against the social structure of the day—“a perversion of hospitality”—as Beauchamp stabbed Sharp as he was opening the door for him as a guest. He further develops the Beauchamp’s desire to be an Byronic hero of sorts in recounting how Jereboam himself seemed proud of his “privileged” position in the trial—“... who believed himself intellectually, emotionally, and morally above the ordinary run of mankind. He may well have been successful in what Schoenbachler deems “getting away with murder”; however this was in the perception of the public alone, long after he had been executed. Schoenbachler credits the couple with “audacity” and “considerable skill” as “they transmuted fiction back into ‘fact’” to the approval of early America due to their script—albeit believed as truth-serving as a “confirmation of their entertainment”, providing validity to the
stories read by society. Their own Confession—a scripted play where they played the leading roles—was the first of a number of fictional “Kentucky Tragedies” dramatized throughout the 19th century.

Schoenbachler provides a detailed, investigative, and analytical narrative to shed light upon an episode of history whereby most of what is known of the event is laced with romanticized falsities told through literature. Murder and Madness succeeds in painting a larger picture of the influence of Romanticism during the late 18th and early 19th centuries through delving deep into the facts, lies, and details of the “Kentucky Tragedy” while connecting the event to the surrounding cultural forces and social environment of the time. The book spends a substantial amount of time describing the various other works on the topic; each aiding Schoenbachler’s aim of sorting through fact and fiction. The work urges readers to approach all documents, sources, and accounts of history with a critical and analytical mind; refusing to rely on a single source while searching for—even demanding the objective truth—the reality of what actually happened in our past.

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