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of Sex, Gender and Stereotype in the
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Abstract

This essay examines the portrayal of Anne-Marie Houde in the media and her treatment by the criminal justice system in Quebec in the early twentieth century in the murder trial of her stepchild, ten-year-old Aurore Gagnon. Specifically, it argues that issues of sex, traditional gender roles, and the wicked stepmother stereotype played a role in her guilty conviction and harsh sentence, since other murderesses in this period were, quite literally, getting away with murder. By murdering her stepchild, Houde placed herself outside of the category of woman and denied herself the chivalrous treatment of the court. This is especially true since, as a stepmother, she faced immediate prejudice by the court and media. Furthermore, Houde manipulated her motherly role in a malicious fashion to contrive Aurore's misbehaviour. In doing so, she exploited the perceived burden of these motherly duties to defame and arbitrarily punish Aurore.

KEYWORDS: Media, Law, Child Abuse, Murder, Early 20th C Quebecois Society and Culture, Sex Assumptions and Gender Roles, Stereotype, Prejudice

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The murder of ten-year-old Aurore Gagnon by her father, Telesphore Gagnon, and stepmother, Anne-Marie Houde, in February 1920 aroused Quebecers to such an extent that it became an enduring part of Francophone culture. Within days of hearing about the fantastic tale of cruelty, Aurore was prematurely canonized by the local press and bestowed with the title: *l'enfant martyred*. Such a moniker reflects the Quebecois' entrenched Catholic mysticism, which transformed Aurore from a powerless victim of extreme abuse into a mythological figure trapped in a battle between good and evil, the innocent versus the wicked. The wicked, as will be discussed later, was the stepmother, Anne-Marie Houde. Yet, compared to the spectacle of excitement and indignation that surrounded Houde's trial, Gagnon's was relatively uneventful. Furthermore, the sentencing of Houde and Gagnon for the same crime, murder, is glaringly inconsistent. Gagnon's charge was *reduced* to manslaughter and he was sentenced to life imprisonment, though released after only five years. Houde's murder conviction, on the other hand, was *upheld*, and she faced the death sentence but *only* because of her pregnancy with twins, the execution was delayed. During this interim, a fierce clemency campaign prompted the Governor General to reduce her sentence to life imprisonment - a mere two days before she was to be hanged. The differences in the way that the Houde and Gagnon murder charges were perceived by Quebecers, construed by the media and handled by the courts reflected contemporary cultural prejudices and biases of sex, gender and stereotype. Women were supposed to possess inherent maternal qualities that were to be realized in the home. It was believed, as it is today, that these traditional familial roles were instrumental for a coherent society. However, women carried an especially heavy burden in fulfilling their roles in society. Thus, Houde's cultural transgressions forced the courts to balance justice for the child, the state, and the tenets of patriarchal Quebecois society. This essay will examine the portrayal of Anne-Marie Houde in the media and her treatment by the criminal justice system in Quebec in the early twentieth century. Specifically, it will argue that issues of sex, traditional gender roles, and the wicked stepmother stereotype played a role in her guilty conviction and harsh sentence, since other murderesses in this period were, quite literally, getting away with murder.

Women murderers, or murderesses, have always been treated with special consideration. Their status in the early twentieth century as delicate beacons of virtue who make and nurture life caused the men who tried them for capital offences to stir, knowing that their convictions would result in the execution of their most beloved treasures of society¹ (Gossage:585). The paternal role of men in protecting women was seriously challenged by this dilemma²; it would certainly be difficult, and particularly unchivalrous, to kill dependent, lesser beings³. Yet, murderesses upset fundamental assumptions about women and gender, and therefore had to be dealt with; they threatened the

patriarchal structure of society that assumed and required women to be motherly and submissive. This was especially true in rural French Catholic Quebec (Gossage:584).

Thus, upholding the sanctity of law while at the same time reconciling the murderesses' disruption of established gender roles was a major and recurring predicament in the early twentieth century. As a result, each murderess trial became a hot bed of controversy, often acting as a forum for feminists, legal officials, politicians, and the public. As L. Erickson noted, these special cases were used "to question women's unequal status in law and the unequal application of capital punishment" (Erickson:296).

Nevertheless, most murderesses in this period were granted a reprieve. In fact, only two out of ten murderesses were sentenced to death between 1899 and 1922, and this was mainly due to their status as immigrants (Erickson:273). Despite the fact that the majority of Canadians continued to support capital punishment as a deterrent to crime until the mid-1950s, most agreed that, as a "civilised nation," Canada should not subject the *weaker sex* to the death penalty (Erickson:273-274). It seems chivalry outweighed the prospect of sentencing women to hang despite calls by feminists and, after women achieved the vote, conservatives, for equal treatment. Therefore, Houde's severe sentence, which was unlike that of her contemporaries, indicates that other factors significantly influenced the decision of the court. These specific aspects include the type of murder committed, which was child murder. In addition, Houde's status as a female Quebecois carried with it a bevy of cultural expectations⁴. This included, quite significantly, being adept in the domestic sphere. Most importantly in determining her treatment by the court, however, was her status as stepmother.

Among the most abhorred crimes of a murderess was child murder. Women were expected to be bringers and sustainers of life in the patriarchal civil code, not their destroyers⁵. Thus, by killing a child Houde abdicated her exclusively feminine responsibility and, consequently, threatened the *natural order* of society (Gossage:585).

The belief in separate spheres for men and women is shown clearly in the coroner's investigative reports. We see that Houde's husband, Telesphore Gagnon, was always "away in the woods"⁶ (Témoignage de Télesphore Gagnon). Even when Aurore's condition was deteriorating to the point of death, he still went dutifully to work (Témoignage de Télesphore Gagnon). His own testimony gives an indication of how strongly entrenched the notion of separate spheres was in this period. Gagnon stated that he never inspected Aurore's wounds and confidently asserted *his wife* was supposed to take care of the child while *he* went to work (Témoignage de Télesphore Gagnon). Thus, by his own admission, Gagnon believed that the responsibility for the child lay with Houde. This was consistent with cultural conventions of domesticity whereby the man worked and the woman tended to the household duties, including taking care of the children.

By all accounts Houde was a model wife, except of course in the murder of her stepchild. In fact, Gagnon reminisced on her fine domestic skills in letters to Houde while she was in jail; thirteen years later he still commented on how "very bothersom [sic] [it is] to be alone in a house with chorz [sic] and no woman in the hous [sic]"⁷ (Lettre de Télesphore Gagnon). Although Houde would no

¹ One London reporter, commenting on the trial of a late nineteenth century child murderess threatened with the gallows, articulates this nicely when he states: there's always something *revolting* about hanging *women* (Knelman 140). Media reports at the Gagnon trial concur with this view, calling Houde's death sentence a "horrible" and "sinister" procedure. For example, see: ("La justice"). Note: All of the archival sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, are reproduced online at the website, "Aurore! The Mystery of the Matyred Child."

² Women were subjected to a *male* establishment; in Quebec, women could not even vote in provincial elections until 1940.

³ Women were considered dependent and lesser beings in this period.

⁴ Immigrants and outsiders were not afforded the same judicial consideration.

⁵ Women were also expected to take care of their men, which Houde did quite well. That is why, as will be explained further, Houde's case was so especially abhorred - she did not fit the socially prescribed role of guardian of husband, home *and* child.

⁶ All citations referring to Témoignage (Testimony) are included in Works Cited under Inquest Depositions.

doubt garner the respect of the jury for her excellent domestic abilities, her violent tendencies tarnished her potential to evoke sympathy from the jury. According to witness testimony she bound, burned, beat, used weapons, ripped the hair out of, as well as, starved and poisoned Aurore⁸ ("Le martyre"). Therefore, due to the sheer cruelty of Houde's actions, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to exploit her positive attributes in the home for clemency.

Houde's abuse of her stepchild threatened the cultural assumption of female motherly love. This maternal ideal, according to historian Andrée Levesque, was most cherished by the Quebecois (Gossage:585). Quebec was steeped in religious convention in this period and thus the protection of the young was a religious duty as well as a legal one. However, punishment with weapons was tolerated, even to the point of drawing blood (Federle:90). Neighbour Vitaline Leboeuf's testimony illustrates just how severe the punishment of children was accepted, at least by the father. She recollected in testimony how Gagnon beat Aurore "like a man would beat a dog"⁹ (Déposition de Vitaline Leboeuf). Ultimately, though, *mothers* were responsible for providing sufficient care for their children. Under *no* circumstances could women fail to provide necessary medical attention for a child in danger (Gossage:594). Considering the testimony of Exilda Lemay, one of Houde's greatest crimes was her subversion of the legal and social role of mothers. Lemay testified against Houde and recalled the stepmother's own words: "The child is my husband's; if he wants to have her treated, *let him do so*. If *he* brings me medicine, I will administer it to her" [Italics added by author] (Témoignage de Exilda Auger). Thus, Lemay's testimony makes explicit that Houde did not possess a *natural* maternal instinct towards children, as the culture presupposed a woman should. Houde obviously neglected her *womanly expertise* and expected that the impetus for child-care resided in her husband. She sabotaged the maternal role of women in society by passing off the medical responsibility of the children to her husband, Telesphore Gagnon. Lemay further testified that she had to notify Houde that her stepchild was "very ill and that it would be best to have her treated" (Témoignage de Exilda Auger). Therefore, not only was Houde withholding treatment from her stepchild but she had to be *instructed* of the child's illness. Houde did eventually call the doctor - when it was too late. Thus, Houde is made a perfect example of the fact that all women do not possess superior motherly attributes that the culture depended on. There could be no doubt in the minds of judicial officials about the lack of motherly quality within Houde. She was informed of her stepchild's illness and then proceeded to deny her the necessary medical treatment, and as such, undermined the idealized notion of motherly love. In so doing, she also placed herself outside of the category of *woman*, and denied herself the chivalrous treatment of the court.

Furthermore, Houde manipulated her motherly role in a malicious fashion, contriving Aurore's misbehaviour to justify the beatings. Based solely on the testimony of Telesphore Gagnon - who distressed over the frequent and strange misbehaviour of Aurore - it would appear that regular punishment was justifiable¹⁰ (Déposition de Albertine Gagnon). Yet, later testimony from Aurore's schoolteacher exposed a very different, quiet, intelligent, and obedient child ("Le martyre"). Since it has been established that Télesphore's hard work ethic forced him to be away from his children, his perception of them came directly through Houde. Therefore, unless Télesphore arbitrarily punished his children before and after his long workdays, which seems unlikely, Houde, it could be supposed, maliciously construed Aurore as a problem child. The latter interpretation is backed up by numerous

⁷ All citations referring to Lettre (Letter) are included in Works Cited under Letters.

⁸ Gagnon's surviving children, Marie-Jeanne, Gerard and Georges Gagnon confirm this. Also, the coroner's inquest provides more specific details about Aurore's abuse by Houde and Gagnon (enquête du coroner, Témoignage du Dr Albert Marois).

⁹ Vitaline's off-hand comment coincides with the way children in western culture have been associated with animals in the past. In fact, the first abuse society was created for the prevention for cruelty to *animals*, which later included abuse to children. See: (Costin, Karger, Stoesz, 60). All citations referring to Déposition are included in Works Cited under Inquest Depositions

¹⁰ For example, Gagnon confided to Albertine that "this child is hard; I can't seem to get through to her."

testimonies; among others, Gagnon himself states that he would mostly punish Aurore when his wife told him about the child's bad behaviour ("Le martyr"). Later testimony by Aurore's sister and brothers reveal that this misbehaviour was, in fact, contrived by Houde. They confessed that Houde stole offerings from church and planted them in Aurore's pocket, as well as withheld Aurore's "bathroom bucket" to force Aurore to ruin her clothes and bed ("Le martyr"). Yet perhaps most reprehensible of Houde's cruelty was that she deliberately soiled Telesphore's clothes and blamed Aurore, knowing that her beatings would be especially harsh ("Le martyr"). The testimony of Albertine Gagnon reveals the effectiveness of Houde's scheming. Before Aurore's death, T elesphore Gagnon stated frustratingly to him, "the *child* does her business in her clothing while I work my fingers to the bone" [Italics added by author] (D eposition de Albertine Gagnon). Thus, Houde regularly schemed to have Gagnon beat the child. Certainly, Houde's manipulation of her role as mother for cruel purposes would not evoke the sympathy of the judge and jury.

Although Houde exerted strong control over her children, a sign of good mothering, it was too extreme. The testimonies of the Gagnon children attest to this. Marie-Jeanne, for example, states in the preliminary inquiry that she was never aware that her father or mother beat the child with a lash whip or a piece of wood (T emoignage de Marie-Jeanne Gagnon). Later, however, with the reassurance of protection from the judge, Marie-Jeanne confessed to the brutal abuse inflicted directly and indirectly – through cunning plots – by Houde (T emoignage de Marie-Jeanne Gagnon). The contradictory testimony of the children illustrated to the judge and jury the excessive control that Houde held over her children. In fact, Marie-Jeanne admitted, though only in private, that she was told what to say to the authorities; in effect, to lie and cover-up Aurore's abuse¹¹ ("Le martyr"). Therefore, Houde exploited her authority over her children and undermined a parents' sacrosanct right over disorderly children¹².

Moreover, at the same time, Houde was instilling the improper mores of disobeying authority. She was eroding the roots of parental authority, as well as that of the state. At a time when the law of men was unquestionable, Houde would thus be subject to harsh penalties.

Interestingly, it seems that Houde *used* Aurore to look burdened. By constructing a negative picture of Aurore, Houde was able to *appear* as if she was constantly straining to reign in the child's bad behaviour. However, since this burden was cruelly manufactured rather than the result of genuine domestic labour, Houde was actually defaming the ideal of the hard-working homemaker - a significant and highly valued principle by early-twentieth-century working-class Quebecois society. Houde was very much aware of these cultural values and tried to manipulate them to suite her own agenda. In fact, in a set of pleas to the Governor General, Houde consistently emphasized that she was a *hard-working mother* that could do the work of three women (Lettre de Marie-Anne Houde au Solliciteur G en eral). Yet, as the jury realized, she was devoting much of her time to scheming to hurt her stepchild, rather than her chores. To them, Houde appeared a defunct woman in the domestic sphere and thus should not be treated with the same generosity as other murderesses. She not only neglected her domestic cleaning duties in creating messes, but also exploited the perceived burden of these motherly duties to defame and arbitrarily punish Aurore. Houde's attack on established gender roles, as well as the particularly cruel nature of her crimes, certainly played a part in the jury's verdict and the judge's severe sentence.

¹¹ This was not the first time the children were forced to lie and cover-up Aurore's abuse. In fact, only a month prior, a local Justice of the Peace had been called to the Gagnon home to investigate abuse charges. The Justice of the Peace, Or eus Mailhot, testified that he had strong suspicions that Aurore's life was in danger and that *he knew she was lying because of parental pressure and threat*. (T emoignage de Or eus Mailhot). Note: In this specific case, the Testimony of Or eus Mailhot is included in Works Cited under Court Documents.

¹² Although children's rights groups were making headway with state intervention, absolute parental control of children was still coveted. Houde obviously exceeded the responsible use of authoritarian power.

The stereotype of the wicked stepmother played a critical role in the vilification of Houde. Despite the prevalence of step relations - due to a high mortality rate and remarriage - stepmothers were often the victims of prejudice. In proverbs, folk tales and popular culture stepmothers are evil (Gossage:564). No doubt, this negative stereotype influenced members of the jury. It certainly did in the media - *La Press* was quick to label Houde a “wicked stepmother”¹³ (“Le martyre”). Certainly, the media does not exist in a vacuum and likely represented the opinion of a majority of Quebecers, possibly a majority of the jury. Furthermore, Judge Louis P. Pelletier told the jury that Houde was “evil” and should be treated as such (Gossage:570). She was thus dehumanized by the press and courts. Like Aurore the martyr, Houde was transformed into a social or religious concept, a vilified stereotype. Therefore, as an inhuman concept outside the culturally acceptable definition of a *real* mother, Houde would have been subjected to particularly harsh judgements. The jury would have had no problem sentencing this societal aberration. The popularity of the culturally constructed stepmother, as well as its significance in shaping the outcome of the trial, cannot be understated. In fact, a twentieth century reporter commenting on the theatrical version of the trial stated: “the role of the cruel stepmother must be emphasized [...] this character carries the entire play (“Aurore, l’enfant martyre”). Thus, from the very beginning of the trial to its theatrical representation - which magnifies and manipulates the sensibilities of the audience - the myth of the wicked stepmother is central to understanding the negative perceptions, which led to the harsh punishment of Houde.

However, there is another dimension to the stereotype of the wicked stepmother. As Peter Gossage pointed out, “the fact that she was not the ‘real’ mother made her acts comprehensible to contemporaries, if no less reprehensible” (595). Thus, the cruelty of Houde was unnatural for a real mother but perfectly fitting for a *wicked stepmother*. With these sentiments in mind, the judge and jury were justified in sentencing Houde to hang. The fact that the jury only needed eighteen minutes to deliberate illustrates that Houde did not require the consideration that a *real* mother would have been afforded (“La justice”).

Given that most murderesses in this period were treated lightly, we can conclude Houde’s murder conviction and harsh sentence resulted from a combination of prejudices and biases derived from culturally prescribed notions of sex, traditional gender roles, as well as the wicked stepmother stereotype. The negative portrayal of Houde in the media and her treatment by the criminal justice system in Quebec in the early twentieth century exemplifies the special consideration afforded to women. They were supposed to be delicate beacons of virtue that made and nurtured life, not act as killers. By murdering her stepchild, Houde placed herself outside of the category of *woman* and denied herself the chivalrous treatment of the court. This is especially true since, as a stepmother, she faced immediate prejudice by the court and media. Furthermore, Houde manipulated her motherly role in a malicious fashion to contrive Aurore’s misbehaviour. In doing so, she exploited the perceived burden of these motherly duties to defame and arbitrarily punish Aurore. Although Houde’s domestic skills and strong control over children was highly valued in Quebecois society, it was excessive, maligned, and, in fact, contrived. For these reasons, Houde could not be granted the chivalrous forgiveness of the male jurors. Yet, it is ironic that she was not only condemned for killing a child but also saved by creating them. Clearly, the thought behind pardoning Houde was that her unborn children are innocent and should be allowed to live. However, the fact that Houde was not hanged afterwards and, in fact, allowed correspondence, may show that society felt justified in granting Houde clemency because of her *capability* for motherhood - at least in child birth. In other words, no matter how cruel and abusive a mother she was Houde should be able to live, if only to carry out her cultural duty of bringing children into the world.

¹³ Houde is also labelled a shrew, which is an offensive, woman-specific term (“Ses jumeaux”).

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