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## **Parricide** **By Amanda Holt**

*Parricide* refers to the unlawful killing of one's parent, although the literature may also refer to *matricide* (the killing of one's mother) and *patricide* (the killing of one's father). Parricide did not always have such a specific definition: the term initially referred to the killing of any close relative, and this broader definition is still used in many parts of the world (e.g. South Korea). Compared to other forms of family homicide, *parricide* is a relatively rare homicide dynamic, and constitutes between 2% (in the US) and 5% (in South Korea) of all homicides.

The killing of one's parents has always fascinated the public imagination. It is a staple of Greek tragedy (see Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, c. 429BC) and is used as a powerful metaphor to conceptualise psychosexual conflict in psychoanalytic theory (see 'The Oedipus Complex' in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1910). *Honour thy Father and thy Mother* is listed as one of the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 20:1-21) and this religious doctrine underlines the seriousness with which parricide was traditionally held. Indeed, parricide was often considered to be a form of *regicide* (the killing of one's King) because parents had civil sovereignty over their offspring, and debates as to whether parricide constituted *petty treason* continued well into the nineteenth century (Walker, 2016). Because of this, parricide used to be seen as an aggravating murder and the most severe punishments were meted out in response. Documents such as murder pamphlets, execution ballads and trial transcripts from early Modern Europe found frequent references to both the 'unnaturalness' and the 'heinousness' of parricide, and most were unsympathetic towards the protagonist, regardless of the context (for example, see *The Wofull Lamentation of William Purcas*, 1624). Famous historical cases of parricide include the case of Mary Blandy in eighteenth century England, who poisoned her father with arsenic and was sentenced to death in 1752, and the case of Lizzie Borden in nineteenth century Massachusetts, US, who was acquitted of bludgeoning her father and step-mother in 1892. Despite Borden's acquittal, her case has spawned numerous books, films, plays, songs and even a well-known children's playground rhyme ('*Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks; When she saw what she had done she gave her father forty-one*'). Perhaps the most well-known parricide in the UK concerns the case of 25 year-old Jeremy Bamber, who was convicted in 1986 for the murder of his adoptive mother, father, sister and two nephews. Bamber is serving a life sentence for this *familicide*, a crime for which he maintains his innocence.

Despite some of the most notorious cases involving female perpetrators, parricide is largely a male practice: approximately 90% of perpetrators of parricide are male, although mothers and fathers are equally likely to be victims. Modern day media and academic discourses tend to focus on adolescent offenders and parricides that involve multiple victims and/or perpetrators. This is despite the fact that (i) very few cases involve offenders who are under the age of 18 and (ii) most parricidal incidents involve one-on-one encounters. Most parricides take place in the family home and – at least in England and Wales – most methods involve the use of sharp or blunt objects. Approximately 80% of parricide offenders are detained following conviction, whether in prison or in a secure hospital (Holt, in

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submission). Dominant explanations for parricide are extremely limited and have tended to draw on Heide's APO (adolescent parricide offender) typology, which comprises (i) the severely mentally ill child (ii) the severely abused child, and (iii) the dangerously antisocial child (Heide, 2013). However, such individualistic approaches tend to obscure the cultural, developmental and gendered contexts that shape everyday conflict between parents and offspring which, in rare cases, produce fatal outcomes. In contrast, historical analyses of nineteenth-century cases files have been useful in pointing the way towards a more contextualised approach to parricide in its identification of different *sources of conflict* across the lifecycle that might produce parricidal encounters (e.g. Shon, 2009). Sometimes, approaches to disinterring our violent past can be theoretically illuminating for criminologists who are attempting to understand our violent present.

### **Readings:**

Heide, K.M. (2013). *Understanding Parricide: When Sons and Daughters Kill Parents*. Oxford University Press; Oxford, UK.

**Holt, A.** (2017) Parricide in England and Wales (1977–2012): An exploration of offenders, victims, incidents and outcomes, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17(5), 568-587.

Shon, P. C. (2009). Sources of conflict between parents and their offspring in nineteenth-century American parricides: An archival exploration. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 9 (4), 1-31.

Walker, G. (2016) Imagining the Unimaginable: Parricide in Early Modern England and Wales, c.1600-c.1760. *Journal of Family History*.

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