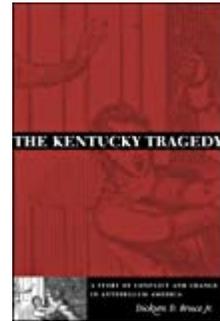




Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. *The Kentucky Tragedy: A Story of Conflict and Change in Antebellum America.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. 183 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3173-2.



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The Kentucky Tragedy is a thoroughly enjoyable, interesting, and illuminating book. The tragedy of the title describes a series of events, with the 1825 murder of Solomon Sharp in Frankfort, Kentucky at the center. These events were set in motion in or around 1819, when, after engaging in extra-marital sex with Ann Cooke, Sharp denied paternity of a stillborn child subsequently born to her. In 1825, rumors of the scandal surfaced in the context of Sharp's political ambitions, and Jeroboam Beauchamp, Cooke's husband of approximately one year, vowed to avenge his wife's honor. Beauchamp murdered Sharp that summer, and was arrested, tried, and condemned to death. He admitted to the crime in a narrative that was eventually published after his execution, justifying his act as an honorable one. Soon after the murder, members of two Kentucky political factions attempted to frame Sharp's murder as a politically motivated one. The Tragedy ended when the Beauchamps attempted suicide in Jereboam's cell. Ann Cooke Beauchamp eventually succeeded in taking her own life, and Jereboam was executed as he suffered from the self-inflicted wounds of his own failed attempt.

The Tragedy generated the largest amount of popular literature—most of it heavily fictionalized—of any criminal case of the period, and continued to capture the American imagination at least until the Civil War.

Over the course of the antebellum decades, various authors continued to transform the story until only the barest remnants of the original versions remained. The story of the Tragedy was retold across the nation, first in newspaper reports, then with Jereboam's confession, published in pamphlet form, which appeared first in Kentucky in 1826, and next in Philadelphia in the same year. A wide variety of creative reinventions of the case followed in the form of poems, short stories, novels, ballads, and plays. The Tragedy survived largely as a romance, one that capitalized on popular worries about (and fascination with) the social costs of the sexual seduction of women.

Dickson D. Bruce Jr. situates *The Kentucky Tragedy* among existing historiographies of antebellum crime and print culture. The author's deep analysis of his sources is the key to what he offers here: a deeper and more nuanced understanding of antebellum ways of seeing and thinking about the American social and political world. The body of literature spawned by the Tragedy was in many ways unremarkable for the time, as it borrowed heavily from very popular (and thus endlessly reiterated) antebellum literary conventions. But Bruce sheds new light on this literature, as with his insights into the meaning of the Tragedy's "unscrupulous aristocrats and its rootless, vulnerable victims" (p. 142), two character

types that were a staple of antebellum sensational fiction. This is just one of many places where Bruce opens a door to intriguing possibilities for a larger reinterpretation of American popular culture. This book will find fans among historians of gender and sexuality, print culture and crime, antebellum intellectual and political thought, and antebellum society in general.

The first two chapters of *The Kentucky Tragedy* lay out the details of the case, tracing its developments and the struggles among its actors to control the narrative. Bruce gets to the heart of his project in the remaining three chapters, and here the payoff is a rich reading of sources that capably embraces texts that, upon his close inspection, reveal themselves to be complex and filled with tensions and ambiguities. Bruce does an admirable job of balancing his discussion of these complex and sometimes apparently conflicting aspects, while contextualizing them within historians' larger understandings of antebellum culture and society.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the process of transformation during which the narrative of the Tragedy took on a life—or lives—of its own, continually divorcing from the facts of the case with each iteration, and becoming in part, as Bruce shows, reiterations of popular gender ideologies and moral, social, and literary thought (pp. 58-59). The author finds in these texts evidence of important ideas that shaped the telling and retelling of the Tragedy, including those related to gender and social status, morality and virtue, and the relationship between politics and “general questions of identity and human nature” (p. 7). Looking at the body of literary works that purported to tell some version of the Tragedy, Bruce also finds that diverse American audiences across the country enjoyed this story in various manifestations, over and over again. Although the narrative details changed, the images and themes did not, and Bruce takes this as important evidence of a “common cultural background” that crossed “an array of class, regional, and gender lines” (p. 70).

The fifth and final chapter of this book is perhaps the most innovative and thought-provoking. Here Bruce shows how a close look at narratives of the Kentucky Tragedy reveals links between literature, political changes, and “deeper concerns about the political and social order” (p. 124). He builds on the previous chapter to consider antebellum ideas about passion and vulnerability, honor and virtue, freedom and disorder, and about how “heroic virtue” might exist, if not always triumph, in a democratic nation (p. 150). The reader will find here an interesting and useful exploration of the relationship

between the retellings of the Tragedy and “issues involving the sources and legitimacy of authority” (p. 125). It is in this chapter that Bruce makes a particularly important contribution to the existing historiography by cogently arguing for the Kentucky Tragedy narratives as evidence of concerns over citizens' vulnerability to “political seduction” (p. 134).

The author argues throughout the book that the widespread “strict and bloody code of male honor” in the antebellum era is key to understanding how Americans interpreted the meanings of the Sharp murder, both the actual events and the narratives that followed (p. 3). In *The Confession of Jeroboam O. Beauchamp*, Beauchamp used popular understandings of this code of honor to justify his actions against Sharp, and fashioned the murder as an honor killing. Here Bruce finds compelling evidence that, given these understandings, antebellum audiences would have at least been sympathetic to Beauchamp's situation. During his courtship with Ann Cooke, Beauchamp said that he promised to avenge Sharp's treatment of her, and once Sharp (allegedly) refused Beauchamp's challenge to a fight, according to the honor code Beauchamp was bound to fulfill his promise to Cooke.

Bruce makes a compelling and convincing case here, but I have a couple of quibbles. First, in his discussion of the issue of masculine honor, he seems to be suggesting that this was an issue that only concerned white men of privilege, and that the defense of one's honor was specifically the privilege of men from economically advantaged social classes. While it is true that the nineteenth-century sources dealing with honor-related violence overwhelmingly describe actors who were white and relatively privileged, that does not preclude the importance of honor to men of underrepresented groups and to women, especially Americans of lower economic status and non-whites. Historians like Elliott J. Gorn have shown, for instance, that defense of honor was equally important to nineteenth-century urban men of the poor and working classes.[1]

More importantly, although the issue of male honor figures prominently in the book, a considered discussion of the specific ways in which notions of female (dis)honor figured remain absent. At the heart of the question of female honor in this period was the sexual double standard, and the stakes were exceptionally high for women who transgressed sexual proscriptions, regardless of whether those women were actual or literary inventions. Bruce argues that understanding antebellum

concerns about the seduction of women is crucial to understanding the cultural meanings of the Tragedy. This issue of female seduction and a connection he finds between female fragility and the fragility of the American republic lead to a discussion of what he calls parallel anxieties about “political seduction” (pp. 134-137). I think that Bruce is on to something very important here, but the potential of his insights remains unfulfilled. A deeper analysis of how these issues relate to female honor and a drawing out of the connections among notions of gender, vulnerability, fragility, and political process would have been most welcome here.

This is not to diminish Bruce’s considerable achievement with this book. *The Kentucky Tragedy* offers readers a very fine example of how to productively and intelligently mine literary texts for their deeper meanings and

significance in the ongoing processes of human history. This is something that the author proves to be most adept at doing, and he has produced a very valuable work as a result. Bruce mines his sources to create a nuanced, convincing, and well-balanced look at the important connections between popular literature and antebellum social, political, and intellectual life.

Note

[1]. See Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 142-144. Bruce himself has written on the culture of violence in the American South, and cites relevant works by other authors as well. See Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

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