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## “I Stand Out Like a Raven”: Depicting the Female Detective and Tudor History in Nancy Bilyeau’s *The Crown*

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### Abstract

This article examines the portrayal of female identity and crime in the Tudor period in Nancy Bilyeau’s contemporary historical crime fiction novel, *The Crown* (2012). Featuring a female detective figure, Joanna Stafford, Bilyeau’s novel forms part of the wealth of contemporary fiction using Tudor history as context, reflecting a continued interest in and fascination with this period and its prominent figures. This article examines Bilyeau’s representation of the Tudor period in *The Crown* through the depiction of English society and culture from a contemporary perspective, employing genre fiction in order to highlight issues of criminality. My investigation of *The Crown* as crime fiction specifically involves analysing gender-political questions and their portrayal within the novel and its tumultuous historical context. This investigation furthermore explores the depiction of agency, individuality, religion, and politics. The article concludes that Bilyeau’s suspense-filled novel provides an imaginative representation of Tudor history through the prism of the crime fiction genre. Central to this project is its employment of a resourceful and complex female detective figure at the heart of the narrative.

**Keywords:** Nancy Bilyeau, *The Crown*, Tudor period, historical crime, gender, femininity, religion, detective, female community, individuality

### Introduction: Writing Gender and History

Amid secrets and danger in a Tudor England dominated by King Henry VIII’s battle with the church, a young Dominican nun fights to uncover the truth in Nancy Bilyeau’s *The Crown* (2012).<sup>1</sup> The detective figure, Joanna Stafford, is the engaging first-person narrator of *The Crown*, a

resourceful young woman who “stands out like a raven,” and who challenges expectations and conventions for women in the Tudor period within which the novel is set.<sup>2</sup> Joanna hails from an aristocratic family, “whose extensive connections include both those active in the 1536 northern uprising against Henry VIII’s assault on the established church and those who helped crush it” (Lyons, “Review”). She is a novice nun at Dartford Priory, but as the novel opens she has travelled to London to be with her cousin Margaret who has been condemned to death by Henry VIII. Accused of obstructing justice at Margaret’s execution, Joanna and her father are imprisoned in the Tower of London. Joanna manages to escape, but only after being pressured into meeting a demand made by Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, that she tracks down the Saxon King Athelstan’s crown which is believed to be hidden at Dartford Priory. Bishop Gardiner blackmails Joanna into getting involved, by forcing her to find the crown, or her father will be tortured. However, a murderer is at work at Dartford Priory, adding to the dangers Joanna faces in fulfilling her mission (Bilyeau, *Nancy Bilyeau*). *The Crown* is the first in Bilyeau’s trilogy of historical crime fiction novels, and for the purpose of this essay I will focus exclusively on *The Crown*, examining Joanna’s character in relation to subjects such as nonconformity and gender.

With the Joanna Stafford trilogy, Bilyeau has made an important contribution to historical crime fiction, a subgenre which, as Rosemary Erickson Johnsen notes, “ha[s] flourished since the early 1990s” (5). *The Crown* has gained wide acclaim, and as an acknowledgement of its merit, the novel was shortlisted for the Crime Writers’ Association Historical Dagger in 2012.<sup>3</sup> This article argues that historical crime fiction, a rich and diverse subgenre, is continually evolving, using Bilyeau’s novel as an example of the way in which the genre investigates history and its popular representation. This critical aspect of Bilyeau’s novel echoes Johnsen’s assertion that: “There has been a growing awareness of historical fiction not as escapist literature, but as a critical, enquiring literature” (6). Critic Jerome De Groot concurs with this view, stating: “Recently we have seen a flowering of historical crime fiction as the subgenre attains maturity and becomes increasingly popular and innovative” (56). Historian Lucy Worsley comments on the proliferation of contemporary representations

of Tudor times and the continuing interest in shocking aspects such as "the head chopping" (qtd. in Clark). However, I argue that Bilyeau's novel offers a complex and nuanced engagement with the period which goes far beyond that sensationalist interest in "head chopping." *The Crown* portrays an aspect less covered by contemporary historical fiction, as suggested in a Kirkus review of the novel, namely "a more obscure aspect of [Henry VIII's] reign, the dismantling of England's monasteries and convents." This article argues that *The Crown* shines a light on some of the less examined questions of the time, using the detective motif as a means of exploring an individual female character and her strategies for negotiating those challenges.

### Crime Fiction and the Tudor Period

*The Crown* employs the Tudor period as the historical setting for its investigation of female identity, crime, power and religion. The novel is set in 1537, a highly significant year in Tudor England. It followed the execution of Anne Boleyn in 1536, and signalled the birth of the only son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, a new male monarch, and the continuation of patriarchal royal rule (Morrill). In his review of *The Crown*, John Cleal describes the turbulent context of the narrative, commenting that:

Henry VIII and his chancellor Thomas Cromwell have put down one rising by the Catholics in the north and are considering a second round of seizures of monastic property to both boost a frail exchequer and stamp royal authority on religious reform. ("*The Crown*")

This pivotal historical moment perfectly highlights the social, cultural and religious tensions that prevailed under Henry VIII. These cultural conflicts are a well-known dimension of Tudor history, which have meant that the period has lent itself well to various forms of dramatization. Recent years have seen increasing popular interest in the Tudor period, illustrated through dramatizations of history and contemporary re-imaginings such as Elizabeth Fremantle's *Queen's Gambit*, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009)

and the 2015 TV adaptation of the novel, the series *The White Queen*, and Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2003). De Groot also discusses this trend, pointing to the existence of what he calls:

a large and growing subgenre of historical crime fiction, from C.J. Sansom to Philip Pullman, from Orhan Pamuk to Walter Mosley, from Ellis Peters to Boris Akunin, novelists have been keen to use the past as a backdrop for their stories of detection and mystery. (56)

In her review of Bilyeau's *The Crown*, Jennifer Funk also places the novel alongside other contemporary historical novels, citing authors such as Philippa Gregory and Dan Brown (64). The range of literary approaches employed by these authors, and those listed above, demonstrates the breadth and scope of contemporary crime writing. However, this richness of material also implies the need for critics and authors alike to interrogate the use of historical settings, characters, and narratives. In *The Crown*, Tudor history is more than merely a backdrop for crime. Instead, history provides the basis for exploring gender-political questions such as agency, religion, politics, and criminality. As Johnsen argues, "some of today's crime novelists use their research to create a powerful, yet widely accessible, statement about women in history, while refining an important crime fiction subgenre" (Johnsen 4). *The Crown* forms part of this wider critical engagement in contemporary crime fiction with history and the politics of its narration, which encompasses both the past and our present day.

Bilyeau's representation of the Tudor period is grounded in her long-standing interest in history, a trait she shares with many other contemporary historical crime writers whose creative work is based on meticulous study. Johnsen comments on the research skills and academic qualifications held by authors of historical crime, and the ways in which they bring these skills to bear on their material, noting that: "Significantly, many of these writers have postgraduate or professional credentials, and they conduct painstaking research for their books" (4). Echoing this insight about the research authors bring to bear on their work, Bilyeau describes the journalistic experience she possesses, but also highlights the painstaking nature of the research she undertook as preparation for *The Crown*, of the dissolution of the monasteries and convents in particular

("My Poignant Journey"). Bilyeau researched the Tudor period thoroughly, especially the details about life in English monasteries and priories during the medieval period (Staats). She explains how: "As part of researching my novels, I travelled to Dartford. I met the curators of the Dartford Borough Museum and I walked the same ground as the Sisters did more than five centuries ago" (Bilyeau, "My Poignant Journey").

However, *The Crown* does not present itself as authorised History with a capital H. Bilyeau has described a mental image that directs her writing process, of a scholarly mentor, an older eminent male professor of history, overseeing her work and critiquing it as a professor would a student ("Historian"). This image suggests history and learning as transmitted by privileged older white males in the academy. Bilyeau's example also suggests the female student striving to assert her own critical approach, and researching every dimension of the (hi)story she is telling for accuracy ("Historian"). Her depiction of the search for rigour and truth echoes de Groot's assertion that, "Historians often describe themselves as detectives, seeking out a kind of truth among the conflicting evidence of the past" (56). Critical assessments of historical fiction are often concerned with the issue of truth and the degree of accuracy in such contemporary re-presentations of the past, and frequently, such concerns serve to dismiss or trivialise historical crime fiction. Furthermore, as Clark observes on the subject of truth, "Historian and broadcaster Lucy Worsley has told historians not to get 'hung up' on the accuracy of period dramas" (Clark). Bilyeau echoes this position, stating: "I do seek accuracy and practice skepticism" ("The Nun"). In her 2015 blog post, entitled "I Am Not a Historian," Bilyeau commented on reader expectations regarding portrayals of history, arguing that these expectations can place undue pressure on the author to convey a level of correctness and authenticity which conflicts with the writing of fiction ("Historian"). She cites fellow historical fiction author Sophie Perinot, who makes the following pertinent point about their work: "I don't write BIG 'H' history, nor, in my opinion does any other writer in my genre. Professors write BIG H academic history" (qtd. in Bilyeau, "Historian"). However, Perinot also maintains that the novelist's primary focus is on the fiction they are creating. She argues that, for authors, their writing "is not driven by the

overt goal of educating readers on a particular period or by presenting an overview of a historical issue or time. The historical novelist's work is driven by considerations of plot and theme" (Perinot, qtd. in Bilyeau, "Historian"). This approach echoes that of Bilyeau whose commitment to suspense narrative and thematic content drives *The Crown*. Thus, Bilyeau does not lay claims to the status of historian; rather she sees her task as a historical novelist to recreate history in order to render it accessible and thrilling.

The turbulent Tudor period forms the focus for *The Crown*'s thematic treatment of social and political unrest, intrigues and scandals, conspiracies and struggles for power. As a historical setting, the Tudor period is an apt choice for investigating gender-political questions and the role of religion and education during that time. Tudor times are often depicted through the reign of Henry VIII; indeed, contemporary cultural representations of the Tudor period regularly make reference to the royal figures as examples of abuses of power. This is evident in an August 2016 article in *The Guardian* which examines the fraught situation of Britain's exit from the EU and the position of British Prime Minister Theresa May. The article draws on imagery associated with Tudor times, describing May as ruling with "the arrogance of a Tudor monarch" (Slawson), evoking the image of a haughty and arrogant ruler seeking to bypass democratic rule. Such analogies point to the enduring popular mythologies surrounding the Tudor period. However, Bilyeau's *The Crown*, and her choice of protagonist in the book, also contribute to uncovering some of the lesser-known aspects of Tudor times, going beyond the stereotypes and popular conceptions of the period. In an interview with Mathew Lyons, Bilyeau states that she wanted to depict tumultuous Tudor history through the perspective of a young woman experiencing these times, and that furthermore, she wanted to investigate the following questions: "What would her daily life have been? What was the structure of the priory? What would it be like to have your vocation ripped away from you, to be expelled from your home?" (Lyons, "The Borders").

Religion was central to the conflicts of the Tudor period, and is also at the heart of *The Crown*. An important aspect of portraying this period, for Bilyeau, was throwing light on a lesser-known aspect of the Tudor

period: the closing of the monasteries. During Tudor times Parliament began to play an important role in British political life (Morrill xiii). This includes its involvement in the dissolution of the monasteries and the Catholicism associated with them, and the formation of the Church of England (National Archives). The crime plot in *The Crown* is inevitably closely linked to the conflicted political, social, cultural, and religious context of the novel. Bilyeau states that:

Historical fiction set in the Tudor era, whether it's a novel like *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel, or a mystery like *Dissolution* by C.J. Sansom, depicts a Catholic kingdom riven by monastic corruption, a system dying out as it pleaded for reform. ("The Nun")

The Tudor period witnessed the attack on and dissolution of the monasteries, the centres of knowledge and learning of that time, and this had consequences for women, "who lost the only institution within the medieval church which had offered them any real degree of empowerment" (Cunich 227). Furthermore, these religious conflicts enhanced the power and position of the monarch, who benefited financially through the dissolution of the monasteries and priories, as Bilyeau explains ("My Poignant Journey"). *The Crown* examines all these historical dimensions within its crime plot. It also shows how these draconian measures caused difficulties for Joanna and other women seeking refuge and pursuing an education there. Lee highlights significant emergent themes in historical fiction, themes that also chime with *The Crown*: Lee states that: "The latest 'hot' areas for UK historical fiction in these earlier times are interestingly all to do with civil war, family against family, and betrayal" (Lee 18). *The Crown*'s crime plot revolves around knowledge, and the mysterious powers of the crown are at the heart of the novel's suspense plot. As Bilyeau says, "Prophecy is the key source of mystery and danger in our books" (Holsinger). Intertwined with the hunt for the crown and the murderer on the loose is an examination of the role and meaning of faith, personified through the nonconformist Joanna.

The opening passage of *The Crown* establishes a vibrant but dangerous historical Tudor setting and foregrounds the book's central themes of the importance of female identity and nonconformity amidst an

oppressive society. The opening of the novel is rich in description of everyday detail and observation, a dimension which adds to the creation of historical accuracy and authenticity: "We passed a small market that appeared to sell nothing but spices and herbs [...] A rich mix of borage, sage, thyme, rosemary, parsley and chives surged in the air, and then dissolved as we rumbled on" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 5). Thus, by creating a suspenseful and atmospheric opening, Bilyeau's prose transports the reader to 16<sup>th</sup>-century London, and the narrator Joanna travelling alone and undercover in an ale cart through working-class London towards Smithfield, in order to be present for her cousin Margaret's execution. Lady Margaret Bulmer is to be burned at the stake later that day, though at this point the reason for her punishment is not yet clear. Joanna's narration focuses on the public spectacle created by the execution, and the function the event serves in bringing the community together: "When a burning is announced, the taverns off Smithfield order extra barrels of ale, but when the person to be executed is a woman and one of noble birth, the ale comes by the cartload" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 3). The method of execution is horrifically clear, as is the gory spectacle of entertainment and edifying discipline presented by the burning. The public nature of the punishment is depicted as a method of exerting control. The opening passage of *The Crown* thus creates a dynamic but volatile city street environment which forms a contrast to the aristocratic and religious settings later in the novel. The passage furthermore establishes Joanna as an exceptional individual who stands out from other women, due to her looks but also due to her resourcefulness and courage.

*The Crown's* opening explicitly establishes the theme of female victimhood and resistance, and highlights the dimension of peril and violence against women which is so often seen in crime fiction (Worthington 50). Through this portrayal, Bilyeau raises the issue of the association of femininity with criminality,<sup>4</sup> questioning what crime is and how we define it, on an individual as well as a collective level. Importantly, the novel's opening stresses the danger to women in Tudor society and the harsh methods used to punish those deemed to be subversive. These themes are central to Bilyeau's representation of Tudor times and *The Crown's* plot, and they underpin the portrayal of Joanna



and her struggle to evade oppression. Later in the novel, when Joanna is introduced to Henry VIII himself while at court, she is reminded of the cautions given to her of his predatory behaviour. Bilyeau's examination of Tudor history in *The Crown* centres on the dichotomy presented by power (symbolised by the crown) and religion. As constable Geoff Scovill informs Joanna when he comes to her assistance in the marketplace at Margaret's burning, the Crown must be seen to suppress dissent: "if rebels and traitors are not punished, what sort of message would that send? The monarchy would be weakened; we would all fall into chaos" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 19). Later as they approach the Tower of London where Joanna is to be held prisoner, Scovill states the simple choice she must make: "It's the crown or the cross" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 29). The stark choice between the crown or the cross, subservience to the monarch or adherence to your spiritual beliefs, is graphically illustrated when the barge they are sailing in towards the Tower of London goes past a series of rotting human heads placed on spikes in the river as they approach the tower, playing on popular conceptions of a repressive and violent Tudor society.

### **Female Identity and Nonconformity**

*The Crown* explores female identity in Tudor England, focusing on differing methods of representing women and nonconformity. Bilyeau's novel thus reflects the way in which contemporary women writers experiment with historical crime fiction, which Johnsen describes in the following manner: "these books feature female investigators and pay careful attention to the political and socioeconomic circumstances of women in their chosen settings. Through these methods, the writers of such novels change the way the readers perceive the past" (4). In Joanna Stafford, Bilyeau creates a nonconformist female storyteller, reflecting a wider interest in themes of female relations and identity in women's crime fiction (Kinsman 157). The significance of the theme of female community in the novel is also stressed by critic Amy Licence in her discussion of the Tudor period ("Introduction"). Joanna is a complex

female character who forms an integral part of Bilyeau's investigation of Tudor times, and the role of religion and convents for women. Speaking of *The Crown*, Bilyeau states that she: "wanted to open the door to a different world and a new sort of female protagonist" ("My Poignant Journey"). Bilyeau adds that, with Joanna, she deliberately chose to create a female character with religious affiliation and function, in order to bring out central Tudor conflicts: "I wanted to write a mystery thriller set in the Tudor period but I wanted a fictional female protagonist [...] a nun was in a very conflict-riven position at this time and would be interesting to write" (Staats, "QAB Interview"). Furthermore, in her interview with Susan Calkins, Bilyeau stresses the importance of Joanna's character being multi-faceted and complex. She notes: "I wanted her to be genuinely pious but to be a real person too, with frailties and flaws, such as a quick temper. Strong but sometimes reckless" (Calkins). Joanna's detective task requires resourcefulness and the ability to penetrate networks and communities which only she can access because of her gender and faith, and because she is well-connected. Having previously been close to the Crown, her family, the Staffords, went through a turbulent time, which affected Joanna profoundly, as she states: "when I was ten years old, [...] everything changed" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 35). Following the Duke of Buckingham's arrest and beheading, Joanna's family was banished from court (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 35). Joanna is a nonconformist figure, both because of who her family is, but also because of her personality which resists meek and submissive stereotypical expectations of femininity. She is courageous, resourceful, outspoken, risking physical violence and persecution in speaking out against abuses of power.

Furthermore, being part Spanish, Joanna presents an embodiment of ethnic minority groups within multi-cultural Britain, as *The Crown* traces a complex British ethnic, cultural and religious patchwork of influences back to Tudor times and beyond. Joanna's mixed heritage reflects the fact that Britain was a country of cultural and racial diversity in Tudor times, as historian David Olusoga has shown (Chapter Two, "Blackamoors"). Bilyeau's description of Joanna's mixed cultural heritage adds a fascinating dimension of cultural diversity, drawing attention to the

complexity of cultural and national identities and their construction, demonstrating that contemporary crime fiction can participate in these ongoing cultural debates. *The Crown* describes how Joanna stands out physically from the British due to her complexion and looks which reflect her mixed-cultural heritage. According to Lee, protagonists of mixed nationality or race are increasingly seen in historical fiction (17), suggesting that Bilyeau's portrayal of cultural diversity reflects a more general trend in contemporary historical literature, including crime fiction. Having inherited her mother's Spanish looks, Joanna visually registers her alignment with her maternal history and genealogy that singles her out: "It's as if the mismatch of my parents' marriage fought on the foundation of my face, plain for all to see. In a land of pink-and-white girls, I stand out like a raven" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 4). As an embodiment of cultural diversity, Joanna's colouring and physical appearance make her "stand out," and thus serve as signifiers of her non-conformism. The story Joanna is told while in the tower of the Jewish women held to ransom there further evidences this. When the serving woman Bess states that it didn't matter if the Jewish women were starved to death because they are foreigners and not Christians, Joanna poignantly thinks to herself: "She was the sort of Englishwoman my Spanish mother had most despised" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 45). The ambivalent public attitude towards foreigners and religious communities is made evident in the novel, through the reporting of comments at Margaret's burning such as, "She's a Papist Northerner who plotted to overthrow our King" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 6), or accusations levelled by members of the crowd against monks for greed and nuns for alleged sexual practice. Thus, as John Cleal notes, in his review of *The Crown*:

The changing face of England, driven by Henry's lust and greed, provides a gripping subplot that is handled with care and balance [...] the book points up the simple faith and charity of the majority of those the king chose to dispossess. ("*The Crown*")

Joanna's mixed heritage is a central compelling theme in the book, that signals the impact of religious diversity, migration and cultural interaction on Tudor Britain, and the willingness of contemporary crime authors to

convey this complex cultural reality.

Female agency is a dominant thematic preoccupation in *The Crown*, and functions as an antidote to patriarchal violence. Focusing on Margaret's execution at the stake, the opening of the novel quickly establishes the sense of an oppressive and violent regime, in its sharp depiction of the harsh judgment and brutal punishment apportioned to women. When Joanna travels to Smithfield in a cart to be with Margaret, she is threatened with rape and only escapes this fate at the intervention of constable Scovill. Joanna overhears a conversation among fellow passengers in the cart, describing Margaret and referring to her as "a beauty" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 5), stating that she is prettier than any of King Henry VIII's queens. Listening to their conversation, Joanna reflects on the severe punishment delivered for perceived verbal transgressions against the king: "To mock the king's marriages – the divorce of the first wife and the execution of the second to make room for the third – was a crime. Hands and ears had been lopped off for it" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 5). Her fellow travellers conclude that Margaret's transgressions must have been severe to receive this extreme form of public punishment: "Lady Bulmer must have offended the king grievously for him to burn her out in the open, before commoners" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 6). However, Joanna is unable to speak out to defend Margaret, for fear of what her fellow travellers might do to her. *The Crown* exposes the chauvinist tendency of blaming the female victim for her misfortune, and highlights the inhumane punishment meted out by the Tudor regime to perceived transgressors. Another passage in the novel demonstrates the power of female silence in the face of repression. While imprisoned in the Tower, Joanna hears the sound of distant singing. She makes enquiries with a female prison warden, who tells her that Queen Jane (Seymour) has felt the baby move in her womb and that the King has ordered celebrations, convinced that he will have a son to inherit the throne. On hearing this, Joanna reflects:

Where the others have failed. That was what I thought, what anyone would think. His first wife, Katherine of Aragon, discarded after she could bear only a daughter. His second, the witch Boleyn, put to death when she could do no better. (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 63)

Suppressing her private thoughts, Joanna expresses aloud her acquiescence to the status quo, stating that, "a prince would be a source of great joy for our kingdom" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 63). This conflict demonstrates the prohibition against controversial public utterance for women, and the significance of women's subversive private thoughts. As a nun, Joanna lives in a religious community where women are trained to read and write. Her access to knowledge sets her apart, because, as Bilyeau states, "The traditional vie [...] was that only priests and learned men of the church possessed the scholarship and training to interpret religious texts. Their job was to disseminate the knowledge" ("Conversation"). Joanna's decision to enter the religious order demonstrates her intellectual curiosity and prowess, and suggests that she wants more from her life than subservience in marriage.

It is against this oppressive context that Joanna, a motherless young woman, seeks an alternative female identity and place of belonging for herself in the priory as a nun. *The Crown* uses the motif of religion as a crucial element of its mystery plot through its characters and storyline and the central symbol of the crown itself. Joanna's cousin Margaret first told her of the convent community and the fascination it holds:

"We were with them on Good Friday, Joanna. We crept to the cross with the nuns, on our bare knees, and it was so... beautiful. So inspiring. To be among women who were devout and kind to another. [...] They love to read as you do – they study Latin and holy manuscripts. To be one of them." (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 37)

The strong sense of female community emphasised by Margaret in her description of convent life is a crucial factor in the attraction which life at the priory holds for Joanna. Commenting on the significance of female relations and women's friendships in early modern Britain, Amanda E. Herbert states that these relations were expressed and experienced in a number of ways (1), and that, "The many methods by which women formed social networks often allowed them the textual or artistic or spatial room in which to further female education and knowledge, celebrate women's skills, and gain financial and social advantage" (2). Sandra Alvarez points out that the complexity of character granted to Joanna is

echoed in other representations of nuns in *The Crown*: “the nuns of Joanna’s order were not one-dimensional typical stock characters [...] I didn’t feel the need to have the story move much beyond the convent’s walls to make it captivating” (Alvarez). *The Crown* incorporates contemporary scholarly historical assessment of religious communities and women’s relations. The critic Nicole Pohl cites women writers that gave positive accounts of female communities in Tudor times, noting how, “both Margaret Cavendish and Mary Castell appropriate the traditional preconceptions about enclosed and all-female spaces and project their own vision of freedom, intellectual perfectibility and sensual pleasures onto the sequestered spaces of convents” (Pohl 95). Commenting on spiritual communities of the kind that Joanna belongs to, Bilyeau states that she: “discovered a rich, vibrant world of people deeply committed to a spiritual life, some of whom wanted to withdraw from society to devote themselves to prayer and study” (“The Nun”). Bilyeau further describes the desperate situation the nuns were in following the dissolving of monasteries and priories. The monks had options both within and outside the church, whereas social restrictions on women made it impossible for nuns to find employment (“The Nun”). *The Crown* thus suggests that the convent setting and its focus on female community functions as a potential alternative model for female identity, education and agency, a vehicle for resisting patriarchal domination and women’s subjugated role, but also showing that this alternative space was precarious. These themes furthermore maintain the significance of the link to the maternal realm, as shown when Joanna is forced to trade her precious, highly symbolic, keepsake from her dead mother – her gold ring (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 4). This act is symbolic of the sacrifices and losses motherless women suffer as they make their way in a dangerous and violent world. The subject of maternal loss serves to further underline the precarious position of women in Tudor society, suggesting both the need for male protection, as well as for female alliances and alternative spaces of safety. In her study of relations between females in Tudor Britain, Herbert asserts that: “To study female alliances is to learn about constructions of identity, nationality, and gender” (2). Bilyeau’s emphasis on this important topic in *The Crown* demonstrates the shared concerns

with contemporary critical approaches to the period.

The themes of female agency and alliances represent a counter-narrative to the portrayals of male violence against women in *The Crown*. Themes such as sexual harassment and violence against women are central in much crime fiction, and are used to heighten suspense and drama; however, in *The Crown* references to female victimisation are also used to draw attention to the dangers and threats women faced in Tudor times. In the novel, Joanna recalls a previous occasion where her older and married half-cousin Elizabeth displays the bruises given to her by her violent husband and explains the reason why he beat her, suggesting that such chastisement is a regular occurrence in the marriage. On another occasion, when Charles Howard bursts in and menacingly offers to "prepare [Joanna] for the men of the court" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 38), the reader is given a graphic illustration of the sexual harassment and objectification women had to endure in Tudor society. Joanna and Margaret's contrasting positions are evident in this passage. Whereas Margaret compromises and makes excuses for Charles Howard, saying, "he is not as bad as that," Joanna rejects what Charles Howard represents, asserting: "he is vile" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 38). These portrayals show that, far from being privileged or protected because of their status, Tudor noblewomen too were vulnerable, and that male violence against women and abuses of power was endemic in Tudor society. *The Crown's* murder mystery plotline unveils further examples of male sexual abuse of women. We learn that the influential but sexually predatory Lord Chester had taken advantage of one of the nuns at Dartford Priory, who fell pregnant. Later, Sister Christina murders Lord Chester. He is her father, and sexually abused her, causing her to suffer mental illness (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 353). Joanna also discovers that Sister Helen from Dartford Priory had woven portraits of nuns being sexually exploited into her tapestries depicting the characters of Daphne and Persephone from ancient Greek mythology. These stories, we are told, "revolved around innocent young girls who were attacked or brought down by a man, despite efforts to save them" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 375). Joanna goes on to note how,

In the Daphne tapestry, Sister Helen went very far in telling the world what happened at Dartford, by putting the face of the real Sister Beatrice into the threads, and placing Prioress Elizabeth in the river weeds as a parent trying to rescue her. (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 375)

*The Crown* presents the tapestries as crime texts which tell a story of male violation and the powerlessness of victimised women, the tapestries becoming a means by which the dangerous realities of Tudor women's lives are communicated. Having herself been molested at age 16 by George Boleyn (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 389), Joanna embodies the harm caused by the sexual violence perpetrated by predatory males in Tudor times. As she flees the Tower of London, Joanna repeats a mantra to herself, as an affirmation of her identity and determination: "Over and over I said it: 'I am Joanna Stafford, and I will *not* be stopped.' I'd sickened of the running and hiding and cowering. A new recklessness coursed through my veins" (Bilyeau, *The Crown* 85). It is her personal faith, and her spirited attitude of resistance and survival, that enable Joanna to prevail. Speaking truth to power, she defies the norms of femininity imposed on her by Tudor society, and prevails throughout the testing and dangerous challenges she is presented with. Thus, *The Crown* presents an important demonstration of the complex and multi-faceted ways in which contemporary crime fiction engages with the history and gender politics of the Tudor period.

### **Conclusion: New Perspectives in Crime Fiction**

Contemporary historical crime fiction is a diverse subgenre, yet the hallmark of this form is the pertinent connections it draws between the past and present. These links are evident in the themes and questions treated in *The Crown*: compelling subjects of contemporary relevance, such as women's community and art, and strategies for resisting male violence and the gender oppression sanctioned by social norms. The creative forging of a connection of the past with the present is used in *The Crown* to examine the nature and complexity of crime and its representation. This reflects the insight offered by critic John Scaggs, who



says about historical crime fiction: "The simultaneous awareness of past and present evident in historical crime fiction seems to offer a means of gaining a new perspective on the present through the lens of the past" (134). Scholar Susan Bordo reports how, when she interviewed historical fiction author Hilary Mantel, the latter commented on her Tudor novels and their relationship with the present time, stating: "All historical fiction is really contemporary fiction [...] We always write from our own time" (Bordo). Commenting on the relationship between past and present, and the problematic notion of establishing and representing truth in historical fiction, Mathew Lyons comments:

There is a tendency to look down on historical fiction, but at its best it is trying to tell a kind of truth – more usually an emotional truth – about life in a particular period; and at its best, again, it can do that in a way that it is very hard for straight "history" to achieve. (Lyons, "The Borders")

Using a historical lens through which to convey questions of gender and crime, Bilyeau's *The Crown* offers us an intriguing and compelling example of the historical crime genre. In so doing, Bilyeau's novel takes on the challenges faced by many contemporary women crime writers who, as Johnsen states, "face a daunting hurdle in creating credibility because their historical material may not fit easily with their readers' preconceptions" (4). Lee concurs, commenting on the issue of historical accuracy and the arguments surrounding it, noting that: "Historical Fiction is a genre constantly at war with itself. There are never-ending arguments about accuracy and inaccuracy" (21). However, as we have seen, the debate over historical accuracy should not detract from the important educational dimensions of contemporary women's historical crime fiction, and its capacity to stimulate readers to research for themselves the historical period in which the crime novel is set, as Johnsen argues (5). Similarly, Lyons points out that, in *The Crown*, Bilyeau investigates British history, "in ways which illuminate vividly and inventively the crises of the period of which she writes and which also open up a sense of how Tudor England saw its place in history which is rarely explored" ("Review"). Bilyeau's endeavour demonstrates the capacity of crime fiction to contribute to revisionary efforts both within history and the

genre itself.

As we have seen, crime fiction serves a crucial function in mediating trauma and violence during historically turbulent periods, including our own contemporary time. Historical crime fiction offers the opportunity to critique the way in which we conceive of the past, and to explore and expose the narratives currently in the process of being written about our present times. *The Crown* illustrates the ability of crime fiction to critically represent patriarchal violence and the abuses of power and authority by rulers seeking to effect radical social and cultural change for their own benefit. Bilyeau's *The Crown* presents an imaginative exploration of Tudor history through the prism of crime fiction, and conveys this history through its employment of a complex female detective figure at the heart of its narrative. Having found King Athelstan's famed crown at Dartford, bravely concealing it from Bishop Gardiner, and assisted in having it finally laid to rest at Malmesbury Abbey, Joanna is successful in her mission. She is successful, and survives her ordeals, because of her intelligence, resilience and courage, and because of her strong sense of loyalty and fiercely independent spirit. Bilyeau comments on this feminist function of Joanna's character, stating,

I found in my research a strong argument to be made that a nun in Tudor England, particularly at the Dartford priory, lived a meaningful, honest, spiritual, intellectual, even feminist existence. I'm proud that through my novels, a light is shown [sic] on this shadowy corner of Tudor England. (Lyons, "The Borders")

Bilyeau's *The Crown* reflects a continued interest in and fascination with Tudor history and its prominent figures which demand our critical attention to and assessment of history as a crime scene. A spirited and multifaceted female detective character, Joanna Stafford of *The Crown* "stands out like a raven."

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup>The title quotation is from Bilyeau's *The Crown* (4).

<sup>2</sup>An early version of this article was delivered as a conference paper, entitled: "'I stand out like a raven': Female Detection and the Tudor Period in Nancy

Bilyeau's Crime Fiction," *Representing the Tudors* (University of South Wales, 10-11 July 2015).

<sup>3</sup>See The Daggers Awards winners archive on: <http://www.crimefictionlover.com/2013/02/the-young-guns-of-historical-crime-fiction/>.

<sup>4</sup>See Worthington 127, who discusses the association of femininity with criminality in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939).

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