

Commentary on an article by Tine Reeh and Ralf Hemmingsen in Sjuttonhundratat 2018: 'Common Sense, No Magic: A case Study of Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century'

Tyge Krogh, The Danish National Archives, Copenhagen

In their article,¹ the two authors launch a harsh critique of my book *A Lutheran Plague. Murdering to Die in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). In the headline, the authors claim that I present a magical explanation on some murders, whereas they document that the murders are explained by common sense. Magic versus common sense is a colourful opposition. The only problem is that I do not speak of any magic. Actually, I do not use the word 'magic' at all.

I shall return to my book's arguments, but let us first see what the position of Hemmingsen and Reeh is. I use a variety of sources – Danish as well as European – to piece together an understanding of the suicide murders and the responses of the societies in which they took place. In their critique, Hemmingsen and Reeh forget the majority of my sources and arguments and instead choose to focus on one specific type of source material, the court records. These are important sources, but they are also problematic. A suicide murder is defined by its motive, but the

Recommended citation: Krogh, Tyge, Commentary on an article by Tine Reeh and Ralf Hemmingsen in *Sjuttonhundratat* 2018: 'Common Sense, No Magic: A case Study of Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century', *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17 (2020), 229–232. <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.5649>

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

¹ Tine Reeh and Ralf Hemmingsen, 'Common Sense, No Magic: A case Study of Female Child Murderers in the Eighteenth Century', *Sjuttonhundratat*, 15 (2018), 113–137. [Cross-ref](#)

motive was not relevant for the courts until 1767, when a decree was issued against murders with intent to be executed. The courts were interested in establishing the facts and in premeditation. In addition, the only way to avoid a death sentence was an insanity plea, and therefore the defense often worked hard to elucidate the mental state of the murderer.

In my count of suicide murders, I have looked for characteristics such as stating a wish to be executed, as when the murderer had no reason to harm the victim, when the murderer gave him- or herself up, when the authorities considered it a suicide murder. In addition, I generally stress the approximate nature of my figures (p. 16). The motives were always complex. The mass of murders and attempted murders pointing at a suicidal motive was however considered a serious problem and prompted the society to act.

Hemmingsen and Reeh analyses the court records of 21 of the 83 cases that I have found in Copenhagen. They have not looked at the additional 46 cases of attempted murder, nor at the 15 cases where the perpetrator invented a murder with the purpose to be executed. They are especially interested in the mental aspects of the cases, and in the cases that they have chosen, the court records provide extensive descriptions hereof. They make an interesting analysis of the mental state of the murderers, as their symptoms would be judged in a present day psychiatric investigation. They conclude that in all the cases that they have chosen to analyse, some sort of mental disorder was present, and that the disorders were “probable causative or concomitant motivators for murder”. Here they could have mentioned that this is in line with my conclusions (p. 32–33).

Furthermore, they scrutinize the cases for expressions of religious motives for committing the murders and conclude that they were practically absent. This conclusion is also in line with my study: “If the court records were our only source, it would be difficult to maintain a dominant religious motivation” (p. 34). Religious motives were not of relevance for the attorneys in their defense, and they were not of relevance for the judges in order to choose which sentence to pass.

The third conclusion from the case studies is that in only four of the 21 cases they find a formulated suicide intention. Based on this they conclude that in the majority of the cases the murderers did not have a death wish. Here I disagree. It is true that a death wish is not formulated in all the court records. However, in the early period a death wish had no relevance for the courts sentencing, whereas in the later period a formulated death wish would lead to a harsher death penalty. Furthermore, they seem to assume that the murderers were ignorant of the fate of killers brought to trial. All killers that were brought to justice were executed in this period, and the executions were large public events where street ballads were published.

Hemmingsen and Reeh's empirical approach is thus to look at each court record in isolation. When they for instance analyse the case of Margrethe Christensdatter, they stress her denial of the accusation that she had killed in order to lose her life. However, they do not consider the benefits of this denial. The ordinary penalty for suicide murderers around 1742, when she got her sentence, was to be decapitated with an axe and afterwards the head to be exposed on a pole and the corpse to be buried by the nightmen at the place of execution. Furthermore, in 1736 and again in 1744 the terrifying additional penalty of pinching with red-hot tongs was used. Such was the penalty that the prosecuting attorney wanted. Margrethe Christensdatter however, got away with the honourable decapitation by sword, which implied that her body was buried in the churchyard.

Furthermore, the authors never mention that her case was recounted in the memoirs of the pietist dean Henrik Gerner. He knew Margrethe Christensdatter. She had visited him and other pietist pastors several times because she was anxious to be saved, but she could not find the inner certainty of salvation. Shortly before the murder, he had forbidden her to visit him anymore. Gerner's private tutor had offered to prepare Christensdatter for her meeting with God, and in the goal she found God and went happily to her execution.

The numerous street ballads written to the executions of suicide murderers also escape mention by Hemmingsen and Reeh. All these ballads present the narrative of the murderers being tempted by the Devil to commit the murder, but afterwards, through the intervention of God, the murderers repent and go happily to the execution with the certainty that their soul will rise to Heaven.

The authorities were alarmed by the murders, and in their analysis, a major reason for the murders was the execution ceremony. The decree of 1749 ordered the harsh additional penalty of pinching with red-hot tongs for the murders and ordered that the public appearance of the convicts should be made more humiliating and defamatory. The High Court judges suggesting the decree argued that one reason for the suicide murders was "that the condemned are being led to the execution with such ceremony [...] that the ordinary crowd [...] get the impression of a happy death, and this fantasy makes evil mature in many ungodly hearts" (p. 55).

The 1767 decree, which finally stopped the murders, ordered that a murder with the motive to lose one's life should not be punished by death, but instead with branding, yearly whippings and hard labour. The fact that the suicide murders faded away after this decree is in my opinion a rather solid proof that the certainty of execution was of major importance when depressed people chose to commit murder.

Based on sources like these and numerous other Danish as well as European sources, I conclude (on pp. 79–81) that the social reasons and the psychological

state of the suicide murderers were very similar to those generally found among people who commit suicide. When these people chose not to kill themselves, but instead to kill an innocent child or stranger, a basic precondition was the inevitable death penalty for killers. However, the religious discourse in which the executions were understood, added additional motivating factors to seek the executioner as the tool for their suicide. This was the case for religious people that could see themselves in the standard narrative of a weak person succumbing to the Devil's temptations, but afterwards to be saved by God. Besides, some of the murderers seemed to be attracted to the attention given to prisoners awaiting execution, and to being the key figure in the solemn execution ceremony, attended by a large group of citizens.

When I call my book 'A Lutheran Plague', it is not to argue that the individual murderer necessarily had to be especially religious. It was the Lutheran state that felt obliged by God to execute killers and thereby provided the certainty of execution, and it was the Lutheran soteriology elaborated in the church ritual that created execution ceremonies that provided additional motivations for suicidal people to become murderers.

Hemmingsen and Reeh call my conclusions a myth constructed by academics of later times. This conclusion is only possible with an extremely eclectic and ahistorical reading of the sources and arguments presented in my book.