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## Book Review of Willaim David Myers, *Death and a Maiden: Infanticide and the Tragical History of Grethe Schmidt*

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*Death and a Maiden: Infanticide and the Tragical History of Grethe Schmidt.*  
By William David Myers. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University  
Press. 2011. Pp. xiii + 269. Cloth \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-87580-437-8.  
Paper \$18.95. ISBN 978-0875806693.

At the time this book was published, reports of the Casey Anthony trial filled the news media, demonstrating that popular fascination with infanticide continues to the present day. Like Casey Anthony, Grethe Schmidt maintained her innocence despite being judged guilty by the public. The tremendous differences between the medical knowledge, judicial systems, and cultural values of seventeenth-century Germany and twenty-first-century America mean that there are more differences than similarities between the two cases. In telling the story of an obscure German girl who was arrested for murdering her newborn baby in summer 1661, Myers raises broader questions of how societies define, convict of, and punish criminal behavior.

*Death of a Maiden* is divided into two unequal parts. The first, longer part focuses on Grethe herself, a fifteen-year-old peasant girl who worked as a domestic servant in the city of Braunschweig. Myers uses the first few chapters to set the stage for Grethe's story by describing the setting, both geographically and socially, of the alleged crime and by explaining the state's concern with infanticide cases as a way of regulating female sexuality. He also discusses the assumptions that underlay the inquisitorial procedure followed by the authorities who investigated the case, most notably the presumption of guilt and the need to produce a confession that would establish the truth of the charges made against the accused.

Myers then describes the series of interrogations of Grethe's employers, neighbors, and family members as the authorities tried to determine when the alleged crime occurred. This was a difficult task, because there was no evidence that Grethe had ever given birth to a child, let alone killed it. The immediacy of the story is heightened by translations from the interrogation records, many of them so cryptic that Myers needs to explain both their context and their content. Grethe admitted to having had sex once (and possibly not voluntarily) with the stepson of her employer, and others reported their suspicions that she had been pregnant, but she steadfastly denied having carried a baby to full term, nor could anyone attest to having seen a child. The failure to determine that an act of infanticide had occurred led the authorities to apply torture to Grethe. This resulted in an initial confession that contradicted most of the evidence provided by interrogation of witnesses. Only after a second round of torture did Grethe give a new confession that was vague enough to accord with the earlier testimonies and so to satisfy the authorities.

At this point the focus shifts away from Grethe to Justus Oldekop, a noted lawyer whose assistance had been sought out by Grethe's family. Part Two describes the public controversy that developed between Oldekop and the city

of Braunschweig over the conduct of Grethe's case. Oldekop published a blistering condemnation of the city, in which he defended Grethe's innocence and condemned the authorities for the unwarranted use of torture. When civic officials tried to take action against him, Oldekop sought the protection of the neighboring Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, who had long attempted to extend his authority over the city. As a consequence, Grethe's case became entangled with the larger political and jurisdictional issues that stemmed from the fragmentary nature of the Holy Roman Empire. The question of Grethe's guilt or innocence was subordinated to that of whether the city had ultimate authority over criminal cases, and that conflict would drag on until Oldekop's death in 1667.

Like the author of a good detective story, Myers does not reveal Grethe's fate until the very last pages. Throughout the book he deftly balances the task of telling Grethe's story with that of exploring issues of sexuality, criminality, and the use of torture in the seventeenth century. The combination of narrative and explication makes the book particularly suitable for introducing students to the foreignness of early modern German society, but scholars will also appreciate its discussion of the assumptions and procedures of imperial law. Although Myers does not make explicit comparisons between charges of infanticide and those of witchcraft or heresy, his description of the judicial mechanisms and legal procedures in Grethe's case certainly has relevance for understanding both witchcraft prosecutions and the workings of the Inquisition. Indeed, one of the most valuable aspects of the book is that it demonstrates just how integral inquisitorial procedures were to the early modern legal system.

In its own way, the book also raises questions relevant today concerning the justification for and effectiveness of the use of torture and the way a society's values define and shape criminality. Although focusing on an infanticide may seem like pandering to popular tastes, Myers's book goes far beyond that to give readers deeper insight into the culture of early modern Germany.

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