In this engaging microhistory, *Death and a Maiden*, William David Myers uses the records of an enigmatic infanticide case from seventeenth-century Braunschweig to elucidate legal procedures, power relations, and gender norms in early modern Germany. The 1661 case, involving a poor servant girl named Grethe Schmidt, accused of “suspected infanticide,” pitted the town council of the city of Braunschweig against the young woman’s family and the unlikely allies who came to its defense. Impoverished and seemingly powerless, the Schmidts enlisted the aid of a renowned jurist and a powerful nobleman as they sought to save their daughter from the gallows. The case is revealing and, as Myers argues, it “allows us to observe at close range the construction of a criminal and to ponder the significance of that fashioning for understanding the history of crime and of women” (5).

The alleged crime surfaced after pregnancy rumors began to swirl in Braunschweig about a domestic servant named Grethe Schmidt, the unmarried, teenaged daughter of an oxherd, who had recently been discharged by her employer, a wealthy local widow. Grethe admitted having had sex with the widow’s son-in-law, but she denied ever having become pregnant. The local authorities were eager to convict the young woman for infanticide but never recovered a body. From the start, the case rested upon hearsay and innuendo, driven more by the magistrates’ obsession with punishing infanticide and desire to assert their authority than by concrete evidence. Deftly guiding his readers through the intricacies of the case, Myers provides a fascinating analysis of infanticide prosecution in early modern Germany. Like witchcraft, infanticide prosecution was fueled by both elite preoccupations and community involvement; informants provided the authorities with denunciations of unwed women suspected of the grisly crime. Part of a broad campaign to control female sexuality, allegations of infanticide led to the torture and execution of thousands of women in early modern Germany.
Myers unfolds Grethe Schmidt’s sad tale in chronological fashion and allows the various witnesses who testified in the case to speak for themselves, preserving much of the original source material in his narrative. The book is divided into two parts. The first recounts the circumstances surrounding the alleged crime itself; here Myers uses the rich documentation that survives from the Schmidt case to examine a wide range of issues, including reputation and the insidious nature of gossip, the trouble midwives and physicians had determining pregnancy, the place of torture and intimidation in early modern law enforcement, and the often forgotten role of defense attorneys in the era’s jurisprudence. The second part of *Death and a Maiden* examines the larger legal and political implications of the case. First, Myers explores the Schmidts’ efforts to mount a legal defense of their beleaguered daughter, until a prominent jurist, Justus Oldekop, rallied to their defense. Determined to demonstrate the injustice of the prosecution, the old lawyer presented the case as a particularly egregious example of the sort of judicial excess he had spent a career trying to curtail. At the end of the book, Myers also shows how Grethe Schmidt’s fate became entwined with the political rivalries between the city’s magistrates and its aristocratic rivals, such as Duke Augustus of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, who, eager to undermine the town council’s authority, challenged its jurisdiction.

Like any work of scholarship, the book has some minor shortcomings. For example, while Myers relies upon recent scholarship on unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and infanticide, a few recent works that might have shed light on some of these topics are missing from his bibliography, including Joel Harrington’s *The Unwanted Child* and Lyndal Roper’s *Oedipus and the Devil*. He includes Thomas Robisheaux’s *Last Witch of Langenburg* in his bibliography, but fails to engage with it, although with its focus on seventeenth-century jurisprudence and medical science, not to mention gender norms and female reputation, it would no doubt have been instructive. Myers’s book is beautifully produced and generally well edited, but a few small lapses in copyediting remain (endnote number 27 is missing in the introduction, for instance). Despite these oversights, the book has much to commend it. *Death and a Maiden* provides readers with a vivid look into the life of a poor young woman in trouble in the seventeenth century, showing not only the powerful forces arrayed against her,
but also the surprisingly vigorous defense she mounted with the assistance
of her family and several unexpected allies. As Myers instructs us in this
fascinating microhistory, early modern authorities used infanticide pros-
ecution not only to punish mothers for the murder of their infant children,
but also to declare publicly their intention to police the sexual behavior of
unmarried women. The author’s insights into early modern attitudes about
gender, pregnancy, and infanticide should interest all readers concerned
with the history of women.

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