

Gretchen's Infanticide.

Isabel V. Hull, **Sexuality, State and Civil Society in Germany. 1700-1850.** (CU Press, 1996). In particular "The Infanticide Debate" (p. 111 ff); also p. 283 ff.

Barbara Becker-Cantarino offers a feminist reading. "Witch and Infanticide: Imaging the Female in Faust I." **Goethe Year Book**, vol VII (1994).

On **infanticide among humans** please read a piece in the **NY Times Magazine**, 11-2-97, "Why They Kill Their Newborns" by Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at MIT. Please note that the scenarios presented here shed little light on Gretchen's act. A few key quotes:

"A mother who murders her baby commits an immoral act, but not necessarily a pathological one. Neonaticide may be a byproduct of maternal wiring."

"But it's hard to maintain that neonaticide is an illness when we learn that it has been practiced and accepted in most cultures throughout history. And that neonaticidal women do not commonly show signs of psychopathology. In a classic 1970 study of statistics of child killing, a psychiatrist, Phillip Resnick, found that mothers who kill their *older* children are frequently psychotic, depressed or suicidal, while mothers who kill their newborns are usually not."

"Killing a baby is an immoral act, and we often express our outrage at the immoral by calling it a sickness. But normal human motives are not always moral, and neonaticide does not have to be a product of malfunctioning neural circuitry or a dysfunctional upbringing."

"In most societies documented by anthropologists, including those of hunter-gatherers ... a woman lets a newborn die when its prospects for survival to adulthood are poor. ... Moreover, she might be young enough to try again. We are all descendants of women who made difficult decisions that allowed them to become grandmothers in an unforgiving world, and we inherited the brain circuitry that led to those decisions. ... the statistics on neonaticide in contemporary North America parallel those in the anthropological literature. The women who sacrifice their offspring tend to be young, poor, unmarried and socially isolated."

In the scene **At The Well**, Gretchen herself describes the sequence of events best and in all their fateful simplicity. It is the progress from "sin" to "shame", that is to public disgrace as soon as her private transgression becomes "visible" as pregnancy. Already here the painful confusion over her private perception ("good, dear love", lines 3585/6) and public judgment ("slut", line 3753) which will eventually drive her mad is obvious. In her derangement and despair she will destroy the evidence against her, that is, drown her child.

In **Murnau's Faust film**, a 1926 silent classic, Gretchen's infanticide is clearly presented as an act committed in a state of mental confusion, the homeless young mother mistakes a snow drift for a cradle. Her search for shelter recalls the biblical "there was no room for them in the inn" (**Luke 2,7**).

For a comprehensive treatment of the phenomenon consult the volume on our reserve shelf in the Uris Library Reading Room: **Infanticide. Comparative Evolutionary Perspectives.** Eds.: Glenn Hausfater and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. Aldine Publishing Co. 1984.

Evolutionary biology and human social behavior: an anthropological perspective, edited by Napoleon A. Chagnon, William Irons. Duxbury Press. 1979.

Adrian Forsyth, **A Natural History of Sex: The ecology and evolution of mating behavior** (Chapters, '93) has a chapter called "The ecology of abortion and infanticide."

A chilling piece on the "Evolution of Infanticide" in the animal world appeared in the Sep '96 issue of

[DISCOVER](#), incl. bibliography for "Further Reading."

[Science News](#) of May 23, 1998, p. 324, has a brief report on animal models: "Monkeys provide models of child abuse." See the July 18, 1998 issue for a piece on infanticide in dolphins (p. 36), and the March 3, 2007 issue about the phenomenon among meerkats (p. 138).

Statt Hinrichtung nur **Bewahrungsstrafe fuer Goethes Gretchen**

Frankfurt/Main - An Goethes 249. Geburtstag ist Gretchen zu einer Bewahrungsstrafe verurteilt worden. Die 24jaehrige Susanna Margaretha Brandt, deren tragisches Schicksal der Dichter im "Faust" verarbeitet hatte, war wenige Schritte von ihrem Elternhaus entfernt im Januar 1772 wegen Kindsmordes hingerichtet worden. In einem neuen Prozess nach heutigem Recht kam Roland Kern, Richter am hessischen Staatsgerichtshof, zu einem humaneren Urteil: Zwei Jahre auf Bewahrung. Er sprach ihr mildernde Umstaende zu. Gretchen sei "Vollwaise, Analphabetin und sexuell unerfahren" gewesen, als sie vom Diener eines hollaendischen Kaufmanns geschaendet wurde. Aus Angst vor dem Verlust ihrer Anstellung als Dienstmagd habe sie in Panik ihren Saeugling kurz nach der Geburt getoetet. Kern stimmte weiter milde, dass Gretchen ein umfassendes Gestaendnis ablegte und die Tat zutiefst bereute.

(From a German Internet News Service).

W. Daniel **Wilson, Das Goethe-Tabu**, DTV 1999, p. 7, reports Goethe's own chilling opinion concerning adequate punishment for infanticide. The year is 1783, and Goethe is now a member of the Secret Council advising the Duke of Weimar. On November 4 of that year he declares in writing that it might be advisable to retain the death penalty for the crime of infanticide ("dass es fuer das Verbrechen des Kindsmords raethlicher seyn moege, die Todtessyrafe beyzubehalten"). One Anna Catharina Hoehne was in prison at the time for that very crime and was executed on November 28. A large contingent of militia was present, presumably to prevent citizen protest. The Duke preferred to be absent from Weimar, reason unknown, as did one Johann Joachim Christoph Bode who left town because he felt that this was not punishment but state-sanctioned murder (Morgen gehe ich nach Erfurth, um einer hiesigen Koepferey einer Kindermoerderinn aus zu weichen, indem es mir nicht als eine Strafe, sondern als ein Staatsmord vorkommt") p. 8.