



Death and a Maiden: Infanticide and the Tragical History of Grethe Schmidt

William David Myers

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On the feast of St. Michael, September 1659, a thirteen-year-old peasant girl left her family's rural home to work as a maid in the nearby city of Braunschweig. Just two years later, Grethe Schmidt found herself imprisoned and accused of murdering her bastard child, even though the fact of her pregnancy was inconclusive and no infant's body was found to justify the severe measures used against her. The tale spiraled outward to set a defense lawyer and legal theorist against powerful city magistrates and then upward to a legal contest between that city and its overlord, the Duchy of Brunswick, with the city's independence and ancient liberties hanging in the balance.

Death and a Maiden tells a fascinating story that begins in the bedchamber of a house in Brunswick and ends at the court of Duke Augustus in the city of Wolfenbüttel, with political intrigue along the way. After thousands of pages of testimony and rancorous legal exchange, it is still not clear that any murder happened.

Myers infuses the story of Grethe's arrest, torture, trial, and sentence for "suspected infanticide," with a detailed account of the workings of the criminal system in continental Europe, including the nature of interrogations, the process of torture, and the creation of a "criminal" identity over time. He presents an in-depth examination of a criminal system in which torture was both legal and an important part of criminal investigations. This story serves as a captivating slice of European history as well as a highly informative look at the condition of poor women and the legal system in mid-17th century Germany. General readers and scholars alike will be riveted by Grethe's ordeal.

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