

Liberating Body & Soul: Infanticide and Suicide by Murder in Early Modern Europe

Abstract

After a harsh quarrel with her neighbor in September 1774, Sara Stähelin could not find sleep. Sometime after midnight she entered her daughter's room, took her outside, and tossed her into a pond so that she would drown. Luckily, but against Stähelin's intention, the nine-year-old survived unharmed.

Stähelin had been suffering from a venereal disease for several years, lost her job, and became the subject of relentless malicious rumors. Subsequently she fell into a depression (*melancholie*) and, at some point, decided to end her life. However, her religious faith prohibited her from committing suicide without simultaneously endangering her own soul. Stirred up by the quarrel with her neighbor that very fateful day, Stähelin concluded that killing her innocent daughter would not harm her daughter's soul, but would force local authorities to execute her. By killing her daughter, Stähelin hoped that she would finally soon be put out of her misery and eventually be reunited with her daughter in heaven.

Stähelin was no isolated incident. In the early modern period, quite a number of women chose to murder children in order to be executed. Anticipating the extensive pastoral care that murderers received during a trial, along with the public contrition and penance that was part of early modern execution procedures, these women understood infanticide as a means to end their lives without endangering their own or other's souls. Research on this gruesome phenomenon is still scarce, which is why my project proposes an in-depth and profound analysis of suicide-by-murders. In particular, it will highlight the connection between suicide murders, intellectual conceptions of salvation, and bodily experiences such as physical and psychological suffering. Furthermore, I intend to use suicide-by-murders to explore the creative harnessing of legal and pious practices for individual and (self-)redemptive purposes, thus opening up new analytical perspectives on early modern spaces of bodily experience, agency, and communication.