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Title: Between Resistance and Silence: The Making of the Child Murderess in German Literature and Culture of the 18th and 19th Centuries

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Abstract: Infanticide emerged as a major topic of public concern in Germany during the Storm and Stress period. Goethe and Schiller took up this issue and altered its social and historical reality by focusing solely on the bourgeois mother as perpetrator of infanticide. By concentrating on the figure of the bourgeois woman seduced by a nobleman and by criminalizing her actions and condemning her to death, many authors denounced interclass relationships and asserted traditional, rigid class divisions. In my dissertation, I show how competing discourses sought to demonize or even convict the mother while perpetuating patriarchal and social systems of power in order to regulate behavior. My project confronts the issues of power, gender, and class as underlying components of the construct of the child murderess in German literature and culture. My work contributes new and critical insights as I analyze texts outside the traditional literary canon by Therese Huber, Benedikte Naubert, Marianne Ehrmann, Friedrich Maler-Müller and August Gottlieb Meißner and bring them into dialogue with conservative contemporaries. By describing the social misery and depicting the severity of the laws to which these women were subjected, the works demonstrate that infanticide impacted the discussion of the death penalty and provided a more complex and nuanced view of the woman as child murderess in her social, political, and legal contexts. Drawing on the poststructuralist theories of the philosopher and critic Michel Foucault, my dissertation demonstrates that these female criminals were not transgressing some “natural” condition, as the works of Goethe and Schiller insinuated; rather, these women were made into criminals by competing social and political agendas. Thus, my

research focuses on how power structures stigmatized women who acted on their sexual desires, thereby violating social morals, as outcasts and deviants. My study of literary works reveals that authors commonly depicted their fictional female murderers as driven to crime by forces beyond their control, such as factors of class, financial standing, and psychological impairment. My work provides a more refined and holistic understanding of the competing interests throughout history and in literature, which sought to construct and define the child murderess.