

From Sex-Driven Maids to Population Regulation to the Creation of the Housewife

Reproductive Struggles in Saxony and the Habsburg Empire in the 18th Century

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Abstract *This article explores 18th-century discourses surrounding reproduction in Saxony and the Habsburg Empire, with an emphasis on maids as pivotal figures in domestic and biological reproduction. It examines how cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors shaped perceptions of sexuality, population policy, and gender roles. The evolving image of the housewife as the ideal representation of reproductive order, reflecting a broader shift towards the regulation of female labor and moral.*

Introduction

This article is devoted to urban discourses on reproduction in what is today eastern and southern Germany, as well as the former Habsburg territories, during the 18th century. Reproduction is broadly understood as sexual reproduction and/or the work of reproducing. Maids occupied a key position in domestic reproduction; they cooked, cleaned, and took care of children. Additionally, maids could reproduce themselves, which often created tension among their employers and society at large.

There is a large body of research available on servants and their behavior, especially in the European context,² including a preponderance of studies con-

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2 For an overview, See: Sarti, *Historians*, 2014, p. 279–314.

centrating on the turn of the 20th century.³ Work on the early modern period, which proceeds discourse-analytically, serves to fill a gap in research.⁴ Until now, the social-demographic perspective has been the predominant approach to tackling questions of reproduction.⁵

To begin, I will narrow down the discourse and attempt to anchor it in the local socio-historical context. Following this, I will explore the connection between biological, cultural, and social ideas about reproduction. I argue that changing socioeconomic factors led to a convergence of Catholic and Protestant discourse, making the reproductive behavior of poor people a problem. The article explores debates surrounding reproduction in the early modern era, revealing that the discourse was dominated by cultural and religious factors rather than medical considerations. As the article notes, in the 18th century, conversations about sexuality and reproduction within families were still a matter of ongoing negotiation. Yet, the delayed debates in Leipzig from 1680 to 1720 and in Vienna from 1780 to 1810 provide evidence that biological perspectives on reproduction and motherhood were slowly gaining wider acceptance, gradually migrating eastward and ultimately supplanting religious interpretations.

Querelle des Servantes

The discourse on servants extends into the Middle Ages, using ancient and biblical evidence⁶ that can easily be categorized as Protestant, secular, and Catholic. The dominant powers in Saxony, Protestant and secular, sought to diminish the honor of maids, and as a result, expand the lordly power. Catholicism, which dominated the Habsburg Empire, maintained a counter-discourse until the 1750s. Catholic priests praised servants and valued their labor.⁷

3 This is still true for the opulent: Pasleau, Schopp, Sarti, *Modelization*, Liège 2005. Exceptions: Frühsorge u.a. (eds.), *Gesinde*, 1995.

4 Cf. Whittle (ed.), *Servants*, 2017. But the related topic of the house has received attention: Eibach, Lanzinger (eds.), *Routledge History*, 2020.

5 Cf. Fauve-Chamoux, *Illegitimacy*, 2011, p. 8–44.

6 Cf. Glaser, *Gesinde=Teufel*, 1564.

7 The proof can be provided indirectly by considering the work of maidservants in Catholic texts as equivalent to spiritual or other work. Cf. *Dienstbotten=Schul*, 1755, p.

Over the course of the 17th century, this two-gender discourse⁸ evolved first from its Protestant and secular origins into a mono-gendered form that focused on maids.⁹ This change is due to socio-economic movements, such as migration and cultural changes, and discussions about female education.¹⁰ It is connected to the *Querelle des Femmes*,¹¹ and is in this text referred to as the *Querelle des servantes*. The discourse positioned maids as disruptive factors. As working women, they stood in contrast to the burgeoning image of a homely mother. As liminal figures, maids helped loosen the constraints of gender norms of the period.¹²

Saxony and Leipzig

The Thirty Years War gave way to a challenging social situation: many areas remained underpopulated,¹³ city treasuries were empty,¹⁴ wages were low, and prices for grain were high.¹⁵ The climate was poor. Nevertheless an unrestrained population growth continued until the 1750s.¹⁶ The population of people living in poverty grew in many cities up to 50% by 1700.¹⁷ Leipzig itself went from 24,000 to 30,000 inhabitants and was a magnet for the poor.¹⁸ Many of these migrants were rural women trying to find employment, which led to further imbalance in the marriage market with a general surplus of women in cities.¹⁹ The poor social situation impacted the servant system. Private individuals, as well as those close to the state, made attempts since the 1650s to solve problems by renewing the servants' orders.²⁰ Uncontrolled

23–30. Alternatively, one can prefer the industrious maid to the vain prince: Rauscher, Oel, 1689, p. 335.

8 Not gendered: Glaser, *Gesind=Teufel*, 1564.

9 e.g.: Marforius, *Kurtze Beschreibung*.

10 Kreis-Schinck, *Frauenbildung*, 1996, p. 15–27.

11 Bock, Zimmermann, *Querelle*, 1997, p. 9–38.

12 Cf. Rütten, *Geschäft*, 2022, p. 45–47.

13 Cf. Pfister, *Bevölkerungsgeschichte* 2007, p. 14–17.

14 Hoffmann-Rehnitz, *Unwahrscheinlichkeit*, 2016, p. 169–208.

15 Cf. Waschinski, *Währung*, 1952, p. 154.

16 Schilling/Ehrenpreis, *Stadt*, 2015, p. 11–16.

17 Mörke, *Social structure*, 1996, p. 150.

18 Kervorkian, *Poor*, 2000, p. 164f.

19 Fauve-Chamoux, *surplus urbain*, 1998, p. 359–377.

20 Cf. Wuttke, *Gesindeordnungen*, 1893, p. 61–146.

marriage and migration were seen as interwoven phenomena. The orders tried to curb uncontrolled migration by making registration compulsory.²¹ In Leipzig, a center for book printing, a number of writings were produced,²² which accompanied the decision-making process and hoped to influence the reproductive behavior.

The Reproductive Theater

Discussions about marriages, maids, and their offspring illustrate quite vividly the intertwining of biological, cultural, and social ideas about reproduction. Around 1700, the religious superstructure was quite evident and shaped the focus in each area.

By 1700, a maid's eligibility for marriage was a primary topic of discussion.²³ The question was a cultural-social one: should (elite) men marry maids?²⁴ Protestant and secular authors mostly argued to be careful due to the lack of marriage barriers between different ranks.²⁵ Texts berating maids therefore accused them of giving birth to "whore children" and "foundlings."²⁶ They claimed maids were procreating illegitimately, which was, of course, a sin. In a novel written in the style of Grimmelshausen's *Courasche*, set around the fictional *Salinde*, which is likely meant to reference Leipzig,²⁷ modern viewers get a glimpse of the problem. A young, fallen, formerly bourgeois, orphan daughter goes on a sexually adventurous journey. She becomes a prostitute and gives birth to an illegitimate child. The child dies. Regaining freedom through the child's death, she marries an innkeeper, which blurs her past sins through this marriage.²⁸ The fear was that with high infant mortality and mobility, a birth could easily be covered up. Since marriage functioned as

21 E.g. *Neue Gesinde=Ordnung*, 1735, Tit I § 4 u. 5 u. 6.

22 Contemporaries around 1700 and at the beginning of the 19th century perceived these writings as belonging to Leipzig. Cf. Zelder, *Sünden=Blöße*, p. 4f.

23 Cf. Praetorius, *Dulc=Amarus*, 1664.

24 For a balancing approach that argues for controlled marriage among the poor, See: Marperger, *Verhey Rathung*, 1717, p. 11f.

25 Against any barriers and in favor of a marriage with a maid, See Praetorius, *Dulc=Amarus*, p. 25–46. Against any marriage with maids, see *Mägde=Verfechter*, B 1 [b].

26 *Mägde=Verfechter*, A 8 [a].

27 Cf. Hatfield, *Picaras* 1932, p. 515.

28 *Celibicribrifacio*, *Jungfer Robinsone*, 1724.

a change of status, sinful behavior could be concealed. What is important: the culprits of all problems in the 1700s were the maids; in the secular *Querelle des servants*, the perspective that masters are complicit is mostly ignored.

But the authors did not deny the physical truth. Maids are made out of “Eve=flesh (Eva=Fleisch)”.²⁹ Maids were permitted to feel sexual desire. But the permissibility of lust had to be regulated. The reference to flesh theologizes sexual appetite. In addition, the “horny lust of youth”,³⁰ symbolizing the inadmissibility of desire for maids, was introduced as an idea. Maids were accused of excessive promiscuity in an effort to discredit them and ruin their reputations. The discussions were related to the discourse of state policy and population policies.³¹ The attempts at arranged marriages with servants and maids were an effort to control population growth.

To this end, writings attempted to regulate the entire theater of reproduction, e.g., by establishing hygienic standards for service. The work of maids was increasingly considered dirty. This dirt was inscribed into their own flesh, so that they became dirty.³² Maids and their relatives were considered to be hereditarily burdened.³³ In a letter from 1810 to Paul Usteri, the writer Therese Huber bemoaned the Silesian philosopher Johann Wilhelm Ritter. Ritter had died in a financially depressing situation. Huber links the situation to Ritter’s marriage with his maid, and to his children: “several reasons gave him crippled wretched children who languished in obscurity.”³⁴ Huber is addressing an old cliché about the inherited nature of maids.³⁵ Furthermore, the discourse addressed the changed status of prostitutes since the Reformation, as prostitution was no longer tolerated.³⁶ Poor, young, rural, and migrant maids were considered a recruitment pool for prostitution.³⁷ The network of wet-nurses was also set to disappear because of changing attitudes and laws on prostitution. Many children had established “venereal lust” because they absorbed “their fornicating wet nurses’ licentious ways and lecherous

29 Mägde=Lob, 1688, p. 66.

30 Marperger, *Verheyrathung*, 1717, p. 23f.

31 Cf. Rauscher, *Impopulation*, 2016, p. 135 – 162. Federici, *Caliban*, 2004, p. 85–91.

32 Cf. Rütten, *Geschäft*, 2022.

33 Marforius, *Beschreibung*, p. 4–7.

34 Huber, Usteri 2001, p. 56.

35 Cf. Schupp, *Land=Plage*, 1704, p. 71.

36 Cf. van de Pol, *Bürger*, 2006.

37 Cf. Marforius, *Beschreibung*, *passim*.

natures".³⁸ The goal, as texts emphasize, was to get rid of prostitution/wet-nurses/maids to strengthen the natural bond between mother and child.³⁹

Vienna and the Catholic

In Catholic areas, a different reproductive regime was in place. Lifelong celibacy was desirable. Marriage discussions concerning maids did not take place around 1700. The predominant attitude of the time was one that encouraged creating many children, accepted their mortality, and was focused on the afterlife. Catholic areas had smaller populations despite higher reproduction numbers. Active population policy was foreign in Catholic areas until the middle of the 18th century. Population shortages, however, usually also meant a shortage of servants. Thus, Catholics were not interested in strict regulation in the reproductive sphere,⁴⁰ they relied on the more egalitarian community of Christians.⁴¹

Even without a political stance on reproduction, Vienna grew from 100,000 to 250,000 inhabitants during the 18th century. The increase was primarily due to immigration.⁴² The steady influx of people led to the availability of a large reserve of unskilled women.⁴³ The rate of illegitimate births was high.⁴⁴ The situation in Vienna reflected that in Leipzig between 1700 and 1720. Comprehensive legislation on servants did begin with Maria Theresa. Joseph II tried unsuccessfully to reform the servant system or to get rid of it.⁴⁵

Of Sameness and Differences

The lack of hierarchy of labor along gender lines around 1700 is striking. The Viennese Augustinian monk and preacher Abraham a Sancta Clara criticized

38 Cf. Zelandner, *Sünden=Blöße*, p. 35. Similarly: Marforius, *Beschreibung*, p. 20f.

39 Johann Georg Joerdensen, *Ammen=Miethe* 1709, p. 24. Marforius, *Beschreibung*, p. 20.

40 Cf. Hersche, *Verschwendung*, 2006, p. 215–219.

41 Cf. Rauscher, *Oel*, 1689, p. 232.

42 Cf. Weigl, *Bevölkerungswachstum*, 2003, p. 110, 120, 122–124.

43 Weigl, *Bevölkerungswachstum*, 2003, p. 171f.

44 Weigl, *Bevölkerungswachstum*, 2003, p. 118.

45 Cf. Richter, *Rütten, Dienst*, 2021, p. 290–293.

Catholic thinking on both masters and servants around 1700.⁴⁶ This can be interpreted as a less capitalist reproductive regime. It was not yet in catholic thinking en vogue to conceptualize domestic labor as exclusively female. Nevertheless, reproductive labor tended to be feminine.⁴⁷

When, around 1780, after a relaxation of censorship, a debate about chambermaids in Vienna gained momentum,⁴⁸ authors accessed a broad body of knowledge. First, they mono-gendered the discourse. As was the case sixty years earlier, there are arguments about responsibility in child-rearing matters.⁴⁹ At the core of the debate were male desire and female attraction.⁵⁰ The conflict now comes into a sharper focus on bourgeois gender norms.⁵¹ Now, men need to be criticized for their desire.⁵² Maids are no longer portrayed as unbridled whores; what persists is a mild suspicion of prostitution and a warning against a marriage,⁵³ just as the vindication of maids focuses on the natural drive to love.⁵⁴

In Vienna, too, concerns to regulate the servants' system were shared by private individuals and the government.⁵⁵ Propositions sought to regulate the servant system via police agencies.⁵⁶ Problems were seen in migration from "the country folk" and "foreigners", and unemployment.⁵⁷ For the registry clerk Matthäus Zach, it was the combination of gender, rural origin,⁵⁸ unemployment,⁵⁹ and the lacking education of daughters by mothers.⁶⁰ Crisis-ridden times are evident in Zach's proposition when he brings the maid, household,

46 A S,[ancta] Clara, *Etwas für Alle*, 1699, p. 545–547.

47 Cf. *Dienstbotten=Schul*, passim.

48 For a detailed description see Gugitz, *Wiener Stubenmädchenliteratur 1902/03*. See also: Richter/Rütten, *Exceß*, p. 297f. Cf. *Spennadelstich eines Stubenmädchens*, 1781.

49 Rautenstrauch, *Stubenmädchen*, p. 14f. M., *Dem Verfasser des Büchels*, 1781, p. 17f.

50 [Johann Rautenstrauch, *Stubenmädchen*, 1781, p. 6.

51 Cf. Rautenstrauch, *Stubenmädchen*, p. 8.

52 Cf. Rautenstrauch, *Stubenmädchen*, p. 12–14. Anonymus, *Spennadelstich*, 6. M., *Dem Verfasser des Büchels*, 14; 16f.

53 Rautenstrauch, *Stubenmädchen*, p. 11f. M., *Dem Verfasser des Büchels*, p. 9.

54 M., *Dem Verfasser des Büchels*, 10.

55 Cf. Zach, *Vorschlag 1792*. Giftschütz, *Skizze*, 1804. Cf. *Zustand des Dienstbothenwesens*.

56 For a rejection of this idea, See von Sonnenfels, *Bemerkungen*, 1810.

57 Giftschütz, *Skizze*; Zach, *Vorschlag*; *Zustand des Dienstbothenwesens*.

58 Zach, *Vorschlag*, *Anleitung 1*.

59 Zach, *Vorschlag*, *Auszug*.

60 Zach, *Vorschlag*, I. *Notheissung*, f. 3.

and society into conflict over the reproductive resource of food.⁶¹ He suspects maids of stealing and therefore demands supervision by the mistress.⁶² He argues, therefore, that a woman must be knowledgeable in household matters.⁶³ Yet talk about maids were always doubly reproductive, as not only the service-giving family was threatened, but the maid's future family would also suffer from her lack of domestic competence.⁶⁴ The community of Christians from around 1700, having given way to a competitive relationship, places families rather than the home at the center of the threats. To speak of families indicates a change in meaning. Vienna's new servants' law (1810) expanded not the power of police agencies, but of the *pater familias*.⁶⁵ A family is not as public as a house. Families have to be protected from external, e.g., police, influence; then the house can become a gendered reproductive refuge.

Summary

The discourse on maids was deeply embedded in everyday life, as evidenced by letters or propositions. In times of population growth, migration, or social changes, it was necessary to discredit certain channels of reproduction. Social disorder was highly perceived as a gender disorder. Attempts in Leipzig and Vienna tried to prevent the marrying off of maids. Both wanted to control young women, slow population growth, and strengthen the housewife and the home as a place of retreat.

The discourse alluded directly to the concept of the family, based on the biological concept of reproduction. When maids were portrayed as sexually conspicuous or writers demanded that mothers take care of their children, it prepared the idea that reproductive labor was the job of the biological mother, not a maid. In the 18th century, the process was not completed – almost no one demanded that service should stop. Yet developments took on a decisive spin that shaped the reproductive role of the housewife to this day.

61 Zach, Vorschlag, II. Notheissung, f. 6. Cf. A discussion of society: *ibid.*: III. Notheissung, f. 9.

62 Zach Vorschlag, III. Notheissung, f. 10.

63 Zach, Vorschlag, I. Notheissung, f. 3.

64 Zach, Vorschlag, III. Notheissung, f. 8.

65 Cf. Sonnenfels, Bemerkungen, p. XIII f.; p. 64f, 80f.

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