CHAPTER SEVEN

LOSS AND EMOTION IN FUNERAL WORKS ON CHILDREN IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

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Historians long (and incorrectly) assumed that early modern parents felt indifferent toward their children until these offspring survived their early childhood. Approaches in psychohistory and developmental history especially supported this now obsolete assumption. This old line of argumentation centers mainly on the love that parents owed their children according to modern pedagogical/psychological belief. In the meantime, it has been demonstrated in many instances that in the Middle Ages and the early modern period parents also loved their offspring from the very first day, indeed, mothers often formed bonds with the unborn life in their bodies during pregnancy. Commonly, documents from this period particularly stress the bond between mother and child as is discernible, for example, in the many rituals focusing on pregnancy and birth, rituals that aim to sustain the child’s life and health. These newer studies often point out the

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2 This assertion can be found in every publication on childhood history and can be traced back to Philippe Ariès, L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien Régime (Paris: Plon, 1960); English trans., Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (New York: Knopf, 1962); German trans., Geschichte der Kindheit (Munich: Hanser, 1975). Yet Edward Shorter, The Making of the Modern Family (New York: Basic Books, 1975), can more appropriately be seen as the conduit for its perpetration.


great need of the parents to baptize stillborn children or to baptize newborns in an emergency. The fact that even parents belonging to the Protestant faith did not desist from this baptismal practice and disobeyed the orders of the Reformers is judged to be a particularly clear indication of the strong emotional attachment to infants across the confessions. In these studies, parental love of children almost seems natural and unchangeable over the course of time. Therefore, we can now hardly deny that parents were emotionally attached to their offspring even before 1800. Yet, this insight must be accompanied with the recognition that emotions in general and love in particular are historical constructs that must be viewed as changeable in their contents and expressions; as a result, the question of the “how” of love comes into focus more sharply than the previously prevailing question of the “whether.”

In this essay, I am concerned with addressing the question of the “how” of the love of children. I am guided by the assumption that the premature deaths of children serve in particular to unleash emotions. In our times, this assumption is confirmed, for example, by the representation in the media of infants or toddlers tortured, starved, or killed. The great symbolic potential that is attributed to children becomes apparent, for instance, in our time when the targeted killing of several children in Iraq is called “a new level of cruelty.” Indeed,