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On Infanticide

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Long before social scientists had invented the term "child abuse" or had begun to discuss it candidly (the present almost obsessive public concern with the subject dates back, I have been astonished to learn, only a few decades), cruelty to children, especially in its ultimate expression, infanticide, was the subject of playwrights and poets. At the climax of Euripides' *Medea*, for instance, a mother driven out of her mind by jealousy of her husband, kills her children, while the Chorus—presumably expressing the social consensus of the Fifth Century B.C. Greek audience—chants in shocked disapproval:

O your heart must have been made of rock and steel,
You who can kill
With your own hand the fruit of your own womb...
What horror more can be? O women's love,
So full of trouble,
How many levels you have caused already!

Such scenes are, however, rare in Classical Drama, for which, in general, children are not topics of interest; though the practice of infanticide by exposure, usually at the father's behest, was (historians inform us) common enough in the Ancient World. For the society of the time it functioned as a kind of "population control," contemplated with awe and terror, but finally accepted as necessary, socially useful—much like abortion in the late twentieth century society. The poets and playwrights of antiquity, however, want to have it both ways—to kill their kids and keep them too. And so, typically, they do not let the exposed children in their dramas really, really, die, when it is the father who orders their exposure. Instead, they are portrayed as miraculously preserved, though sometimes ironically doomed, like Sophocles' Oedipus, to succeed in murdering the father who has failed to murder them.

Nearly two thousand years later, Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale* (which he sets in the long-gone past rather than his own time) seems bound still by that convention, or rather perhaps, is responding still to the same patriarchal ambivalence. Though Leontes, the troubled king and father in his play, at first resolves to kill outright the girl-child his wife Hermione is about to bear, because he falsely considers her illegitimate, he is instead exposed; and she survives to preside over the play's Happy Ending. It is true, that his son, Mamilius (the closest thing to a full-scale portrait of a child which the age of Shakespeare could conceive) actually dies, but not at his father's hand. He pines away instead in super-sensitive response to his mother's unmerited dishonor, creating a pathetic scene or two which most readers somehow do not remember. We do not, in fact, typically recall any of the passages in which Leontes threatens the life of either of his children.

Certainly not as vividly as we do the speech in which Lady Macbeth merely imagines the murder of a child, setting it in the context of weaning, that act of maternal rejection which all mankind has endured, in fantasy if not in fact.

... I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed his brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this....

It is mothers whom from the start dramatists portray as the mythological perpetrators of infanticide; while rape, that other form of ultimate child abuse, is archetypically attributed to the father. And modern researchers, depending on statistics rather than imagination, concur, telling us that even now the majority of infants killed in the home die at the hands of their mothers. Their motives, however, are less than those that moved such witch-mothers as Medea and Lady Macbeth, than those of Goethe's gentle and passive Gretchen, driven mad by the birth of an illegitimate child. Begun toward the end of the eighteenth and completed in the early nineteenth century, which is to say in the Age of Sentimentality, the work in which she appears seeks to evoke pity rather than horror, portraying the guilty mother as a victim quite as pitiful as the newborn child she drowns. Even after Gretchen has been condemned to death for her crime, she calls still on her lover to save their baby:

Quickly! Quickly!
Save your poor child.
Run! Straight up the path
along the bank,
over the footbridge,
into the woods,
to the left where the plank
is in the pond.
Seize it quickly!
It's trying to keep afloat,
it is still struggling.
Save it! Save it!

And for this she is herself apparently saved; since though Mephistopheles cries, "she is judged and doomed!" a "Voice from Above" answers, "She is saved."

Even in the age of Nobody's Fault, it is a woman whom is shown murdering her own child; however that fault is mitigated by sentiment. And in our own time mothers as killers not just of infants but of their own grown children are similarly presented—as more pathetic than monstrous, sometimes even as justified executioners. In the years 1975-76, for instance, just at the point when the mounting campaign against violence on television was focusing in on Cop Shows like *Kojack*, *Cannon* and *Starsky & Hutch*, those shows had developed a mythic scenario about virtuous mothers and their delinquent sub-teen or barely teen-age sons. At first

skeptical and defensive, such mothers become gradually convinced that their sons are in fact criminals, as the street-wise detective hero of the series had all along warned them: a menace not just to society in general but to other children in particular.

At this point they "blow the whistle," which is to say, assign their delinquent offspring to jail—or, in one case at least, actually shoot their boy down with the gun that had belonged to his father. It is a cathartic document, vicariously fulfilling the actually unfulfilled threat of millions of parents (whispered, most usually, only in the darkness of their own heads) when confronted by an "un-natural," i.e., an unmythological child: "Christ, I'd like to kill the little bastard," or "He'd be better off dead." For most of us, such vicarious fulfillment is enough; though the fact that we demand it of a popular art form (which we then self-righteously condemn) reveals an ultimately unbearable discrepancy between the life we live as parents and an outmoded mythology derived from Rousseau, Blake and Wordsworth, through which we try to make sense of it.

Though not many teen-agers are in fact shot these days by their mothers, babies are, with disconcerting frequency, victims of maternal abuse of which being truly defenseless and vulnerable, they are likely to perish. And the cause of such sub-intended infanticide is most often perhaps the kind of rage and frustration prevalent among mothers with only the haziest romantic notion of the realities of life with a new, unremittingly demanding child. Released by drink or dope, or exacerbated by neglect and abuse from husbands, themselves driven out of control by similar pressures, such rage eventuates in death—most often, it would seem, in underprivileged households. In such households, in fact, it constitutes a kind of belated birth control: the birth control of the careless, the ill-informed or of those whose religion forbids (and in this country, Roman Catholicism is largely a working-class religion) artificial contraception, sterilization or abortion. It is the modern equivalent to the quasi-accepted "rolling over" in bed or farming out to "angel-makers," used for similar purposes by poor families of earlier times.

The kind of "enlightened" bourgeois parents, however, loudest in blame of such "crimes" and of the authorities who fail to intervene in time to prevent them, manage to combine a general opposition to violence (which includes not only the brutal punishment of children, but the death penalty and the manufacture of atomic weapons) with an advocacy of abortion, which is to say, pre-infanticide. It is not a matter of witting hypocrisy on their part, any more than it is for certain anti-abortionist "right-to-lifers" to urge the restoration of the death penalty. It would seem rather that most of us are driven to search desperately, below the level of full consciousness, for a myth system which will permit the ritualized slaughter of some human beings, actual or potential, who, according to that mythology, *do not really count*—whether these be fetuses, newborn infants, all children or hardened criminals who have themselves killed cops....

Leslie Fiedler is presently working on two manuscripts; one a critical study of Olaf Stapledon, almost completed; and the other, a long theoretical essay called *What Was Literature?*, which is barely begun.

A Reply to Fiedler

Marvin Kohl

Professor Fiedler comments upon the sad spectacle of the history of the killing of other human beings. He correctly observes that western literature is largely marked by an ambivalence toward death, especially infanticide; that poets and playwrights want to have it both ways—to kill their kids and keep them too. With an admirable mixture of self-restraint and compassion, he admits that certain types of suffering breeds, and may partially excuse causally related, violence. Indeed, a child is among the weakest of beings and therefore needs to be adequately protected. But the furies often have a way of striking at adults, of bringing such fear and violence to their lives that they find it necessary to prey upon those who are weaker, even if they be their own children. Fiedler also provides a scathing description of another type of oscillation, one presumably shared by the typical "right-to-lifer" and advocate of abortion. Without benefit of argument, he concludes that most of us seem to be driven to search desperately, below the level of full consciousness, for a myth which will permit the ritualized slaughter of certain kinds of individuals; that both parties to the abortion dispute are guilty of accepting myths that permit the killing of certain individuals on the grounds that not all human beings really count; and that the acceptance of any form of killing as being permissible is unwitting hypocrisy. I shall take issue with only the last two points.

The claim that the majority of the protagonists in the abortion dispute hold that not all human beings really count has a certain flamboyant appeal. After all, it does seem plausible to say that if human beings really count we would not kill them. But this simply does not hold up to careful scrutiny. I remember Ghandhi writing that if an animal or his own child were inflicted with rabies and there was no helpful remedy to relieve the agony, he would consider it his duty to take that life. There are situations where one may be morally forced to end the life of a being that counts, and at times one that counts the most.

Of course the problem of abortion raises a different issue. But, contrary to what Fiedler suggests, the majority of those who favor a pro-abortion policy could hold, not that the fetus does not count at all, but that it does not count enough; that when there is conflict between the welfare of a woman and the life of her unborn child, it is a morally better world that allows the woman the choice of whether or not to have an abortion. Now it may be argued (and I believe with considerable force) that the claim that a world which permits abortion is morally better than one that prohibits that practice is false. But, whatever be the veridical status of the claim, it is clearly a moral one. For it urges that the rights of humans between birth

and death take moral precedence over the rights of other beings. This is one important part of the Maximization Principle, which asserts that actual human beings are of more consequence than potential ones; that when there is a conflict of rights between human beings and animals, dead human beings, or future humanity, the rights of human beings take moral priority and ought to be maximized.

Professor Fiedler would be correct in saying, if that were all he said, that in each camp there are *some* zealots who hold, consciously or unconsciously, that those we are permitted to kill do not count at all. Some right-to-lifers do hold that convicted murderers are not human and therefore are not entitled to be treated as such. Similarly, some advocates of abortion hold that the fetus is only a conglomerate of tissue and therefore not entitled to any moral protection. But these zealots seem to be in the minority. The majority of both advocates and opponents of abortion hold points of view that deserve to be recognized as "moral." Perhaps they only express a submerged idealism, only a part of an ideal representation of what is morally right or wrong. The fact that they seldom explicate a full theory does not mean that they are not presenting an ideal standard for action. The fact that their perspectives disagree and cannot both be true is neither a cause for alarm nor a signal to blindly retreat to pacifism. And if, as I suspect, a clandestine form of, or longing for, pacifism lies behind Fiedler's words, then I would like to close with a passage from T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*:

God has told people that they would have to cease to live as individuals. They would have to go into the force of life, like a drop falling into a river. God said that it was only the men who could give up their jealous selves, their futile individualities of happiness and sorrow, who would die peacefully and enter the ring. He that would save his life was asked to lose it.

Yet there was something in the old white head [of King Arthur] which could not accept the godly view. Obviously you might cure a cancer of the womb by not having a womb in the first place. Sweeping and drastic remedies could cut out anything—and life with the cut. Ideal advice, which nobody was built to follow, was no advice at all. Advising heaven to earth was useless.