

Turning a Blind Eye: Infanticide and Missing Babies in Seventeenth-Century Geneva

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In August 1677, the Genevan consistory, a church court preoccupied with regulating sexual sin, summoned Louise Bouffa. Louise was a single woman recently hired by the wealthy Sarasin family as a wet nurse, an occupation that signaled to the consistory that she had recently given birth. The pastors and elders wanted to know who the father was and where the child was now. Louise was at first evasive. She claimed not to know the name of the father, although she did admit that the man with whom she had had sex was “very well dressed.”¹ She said that she had given birth not far from Geneva, in the village of Gy, where the baby had been baptized and then had died. These claims turned out to be false. The Genevan consistory contacted the pastor in Gy who denied that her child had been baptized there.² Summoned to tell the truth, Louise admitted that she had given the baby away to a man named Bertet to present as his own child for baptism, although she added that she was aware he had not done so. She also revealed that the father of the infant was a well-respected Genevan citizen and lawyer, Léonard Revillod, in whose household she had been working when she became pregnant. The consistory admonished Louise for lying about the baptism and sent her and her master to the criminal court to be prosecuted. This court, an elected body called the Small Council, duly fined Léonard for having had sex with his servant and for having “obliged her to give the baby to a stranger.”³ As for Louise, she

1. Archives d'État de Genève (hereafter AEG), Procès-verbaux des séances du Consistoire (hereafter R. Consist.) 63, f. 55v (August 30, 1677).

2. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 57v (September 20, 1677).

3. AEG Procès-verbaux des Régistres du Conseil (hereafter RC) 177, f. 344-45 (September 8, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 362 (September 15, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 364 (September 18, 1677).

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was merely sent back to the consistory, which excluded her from participating in communion. No further investigation of the fate of the infant ensued.

Louise's experience was not unusual. Originally from the village of Cergny, Louise was one of several immigrant servants working in Geneva who left the city each year to give birth and then returned a few months later, without the child. These unmarried mothers, many of whom were subsequently employed as wet nurses, explained what had happened to the child in various ways: a few women categorically denied that they had ever been pregnant; others claimed that the child was in the care of a wet nurse in a far-off village. A handful, like Louise, frankly admitted having given the child away, usually at the behest of the man whom they claimed was the father. Others revealed that their babies had died, but offered little explanation regarding the circumstances of their death. In 1677 and 1678, the authorities identified twenty-five single mothers who left Geneva to give birth outside of the city. Two of these single mothers later admitted to having given the child away and six of the children were reported to have died shortly after birth.⁴ The consistory referred some of these women to the Small Council for criminal prosecution, but the councilors merely retroactively found them guilty of fornication. None of these women or their associates were investigated for child abandonment or infanticide.

Had these women given birth within the city walls, the Small Council would have prosecuted them. During the seventeenth century, the Small Council was vigilant in its investigation of illegitimate children born in Geneva. It did its best to reunite single mothers with abandoned children and then punished them for their irresponsibility.⁵ When faced with an infant corpse, the Small Council ordered surgeons to examine it to determine the cause of death, and made every effort to identify the mother.⁶ Death by natural causes, which was of course very common for newborns, nevertheless needed to be proven in Geneva if the mother was unmarried or

4. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 57v (September 20, 1677); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 89v-90 (December 6, 1677); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 157 (August 29, 1678); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 156-156v (August 22, 1678); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 26-28 (May 17, 1677); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 162v (October 3, 1678); AEG RC 177, f. 274 (July 6, 1677).

5. AEG Procès Criminels (hereafter PC) 1^e Série 3812; and AEG PC 1^e Série 3248. In contrast, the parents of most abandoned children in eighteenth-century Geneva were never identified. Daniel Aquillon, "Hélène Chambras, Marie Passant, Georges Parvis. Ou le don et l'abandon d'enfants à l'Hôpital au XVIII^e siècle," in *Sauver l'âme, nourrir le corps*, ed. Bernard Lescaze (Geneva: Hospice Général, 1985), 203–28.

6. Nadezda Jilek, "L'infanticide à Genève aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles (1600–1798)" (Master's thesis, University of Geneva, 1978); and Michel Porret, "Le crime des filles 'séduites et abandonnées,'" in *Sur la législation et l'infanticide* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 163–87.

if the baby died while being cared for by a wet nurse.⁷ If the death proved suspicious, the Small Council did not hesitate to charge single mothers with murdering their newborns, and issued more death sentences per capita for infanticide than many other seventeenth-century European jurisdictions.⁸

Why were Louise and mothers like her spared? Some, like Louise, were protected by powerful patrons: the reluctance of the Small Council to charge elite men of their own social class with child abandonment protected some poor single mothers from criminal prosecution. Most were not so lucky, but the fact that their babies were missing was seminal, because the body of the infant, alive or dead, provided key evidence in any criminal investigation for either infanticide or abandonment. Finally, the labor of single mothers like Louise was in high demand in Geneva. Although the consistory and the Small Council did not always see eye to eye regarding the punishment of extramarital sex, both courts recognized how important the labor of young single women was to the local economy. Better to punish these single mothers for fornication, exclude them temporarily from communion, and then move on.

This disregard for the fate of illegitimate children born in the countryside forces us to re-examine our assumptions about early modern infanticide prosecution as being motivated by a horror of infant murder and a desire to ostracize single mothers. Historians have long assumed that Christian Europe was distinct from Asian civilizations such as early modern China and Japan, where infanticide was forbidden but widely practiced to control fertility and manage desired sex ratios.⁹ Draconian laws promulgated in England, France, and Germany between 1530 and 1630 targeted the secret births of bastards born to unmarried women. Vigorous criminal prosecution for infanticide in the subsequent century has led historians to argue that early modern Europeans were exceptional in their judgment of illegitimacy and their intolerance of abortion and newborn murder.¹⁰ Yet, increasingly, that narrative is being challenged, especially with regard to

7. AEG PC 1^e Série 3766; AEG PC 1^e Série 3996; and Anne-Sophie Trabichet, “‘Tant que l’on nourrit, l’on rit?’ Être nourrice à Genève au XVII^e siècle” (Master’s thesis, University of Geneva, 2018), 70–73.

8. The population of Geneva and its environs was approximately 15,000 in the 1670s. Alfred Perrenoud, *La population de Genève du seizième au début du dix-neuvième siècle* (Geneva: Société d’histoire et d’archéologie de Genève, 1979).

9. Fabian Drixler, *Mabiki: Infanticide and Population Growth in Eastern Japan, 1660–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michelle T. King, *Between Birth and Death: Female Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

10. The heyday of executions for infanticide in Western Europe occurred between 1550 and 1700. After 1700, courts increasingly mitigated the final sentence or exonerated the accused. Important contributions to this literature include Mark Jackson, *New-Born Child*

married women. Research on infanticide across early modern Europe reveals that authorities often ignored or downplayed the suspicious deaths of infants born to married couples.¹¹ Historical demographers working with parish records have discovered significant deviations from normal sex ratios in many registers, which suggests that some married couples employed abortion, abandonment, or neglect to manage family size.¹² We are learning that betrothed couples often resorted to abortifacients to try to control their fertility and were only rarely prosecuted for having done so.¹³ More remarkably, the evidence presented here shows that the Genevan Small Council also ignored many accounts of suspicious deaths of children born to single mothers, the classic target of early modern prosecution. Single mothers in seventeenth-century Geneva took advantage of the fact that the Small Council dismissed or downplayed many reports of infant deaths that occurred in the countryside. When they returned to the city after giving birth, these young women provided accounts of their absent children that seem to have been crafted to avoid provoking criminal prosecution. The two major regulatory authorities in Geneva, the Small Council and the consistory, cooperated in making it

Murder (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Laura Gowing, "Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 87–115; Margaret Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide and Abortion in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Alfred Soman, "Anatomy of an Infanticide Trial: The Case of Marie-Jeanne Bartonnet (1742)," in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, ed. Michael Wolfé (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 248–72; Robert Muchembled, "Fils de Cain, enfants de Médée: homicide et infanticide devant le Parlement de Paris (1575–1604)," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62 (2007): 1063–94; Yvonne Bongert, "L'infanticide au siècle des Lumières," *Revue Historique du Droit Français et Étranger* 2 (1979): 247–57; and Julie Hardwick, *Sex in an Old Regime City: Young Workers and Intimacy in France, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

11. Richard C. Trexler, "Infanticide in Florence," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973): 98–116; Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide*, 41–42; and Jackson, *New-Born Murder*, 40–45.

12. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Childhood in Tuscany at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," and "Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300–1530," in *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 94–131, 132–64; Gregory Hanlon, "Routine Infanticide in the West 1500–1800," *History Compass* 14 (2016): 535–48; and Laura Hynes, "Routine Infanticide by Married Couples?" *Journal of Early Modern History* 15 (2011): 507–30.

13. Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide*, 26, 42, 74–76; Julie Hardwick, "In Search of a 'Remedy': Young Women, their Intimate Partners, and the Challenge of Fertility in Early Modern France," in *The Youth of Early Modern Women*, ed. Elizabeth S. Cohen and Margaret Reeves (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 315–331; and John Christopoulos, "Abortion and the Confessional in Counter-Reformation Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012): 443–84.

possible for these young women to abandon their infants and return to Geneva to work.

Most single mothers left the city before they gave birth, oftentimes only a few weeks or days beforehand. They tended to remain in Geneva as long as possible, working until they could no longer hide their pregnancies from suspicious mistresses and neighbors.¹⁴ Leaving was a rational response to the regulatory regime imposed by the Small Council on pregnant women who were unlikely to marry their partners.¹⁵ The Small Council encouraged these women to depart and convicted them of fornication if they stayed. Although the usual punishment for fornication was a few days in prison, these women also risked being confined for a longer stint at the local house of correction, being banished from the city, and being held responsible for the upkeep of their infant.¹⁶

The Small Council was in many ways entirely typical of the political councils that ruled many Swiss, German, and Dutch communities.¹⁷ This twenty-five member council enjoyed broad executive and judicial authority, including managing diplomatic and trade relations, maintaining public order, and enforcing commercial regulations, as well as adjudicating civil and criminal matters. Its jurisdiction included Geneva itself and a small hinterland that extended in uneven pockets within a few miles of the city. Like judges in many urban communities in Germany and Switzerland, many Genevan councilors had no formal legal training, but their long practical experience gave them the confidence to make fairly consistent, legally sound judgments. Criminal prosecution in Geneva followed the inquisitorial method, in which establishing a full proof of a

14. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 110–48; Ulinka Rublack, “Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany,” *Past & Present* 150 (1996): 84–110; and Cathy McClive, “The Hidden Truths of the Belly,” *Social History of Medicine* 15 (2002): 209–27.

15. The Small Council rarely prosecuted betrothed couples for fornication, although the consistory did deny them communion if their child was born shortly after their marriage. See AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 165 (November 8, 1678); and AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 4 (July 2, 1685).

16. Anne-Marie Barras-Dorsaz, “Un mode de répression genevois aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: la maison de discipline,” in *Sauver l’âme*, 91–97; AEG PC 1^e Série 4183; AEG RC 178, f. 184 (May 22, 1678); and AEG RC 170, f. 74 (February 7, 1670).

17. Bernard Lescaze, “L’organisation politique de la République,” in *Vivre à Genève autour de 1600*, 2 vols., ed. Liliane Mottu-Weber, Bernard Lescaze, and Anne-Marie Piuze (Geneva: Slatkine, 2002–06), 2: 49–93; and E. William Monter, *Studies in Genevan Government (1536–1605)* (Geneva: Droz, 1964).

capital crime normally required either the confession of the defendant or the testimony of two reliable eyewitnesses.¹⁸

The Small Council nevertheless prosecuted crime in a unique judicial environment. Having broken away from the House of Savoy and established its independence in the 1530s, Geneva was not subject to the laws of the Holy Roman Empire or of nearby France.¹⁹ Whereas local courts in France and Germany took both customary practice and imperial/royal edicts into consideration when prosecuting crime, Geneva refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of any higher power, apart from God.²⁰ Judicial practice in Geneva was founded instead on very sparse customary law, legal precedent, and consultations with trained lawyers, who often cited Roman law as a key foundational principle.²¹ Yet, as will be discussed, even in the absence of a law that precisely delimited the crime of infanticide, its prosecution in Geneva was remarkably similar to prosecutions in nearby Germany and France.

Contemporary visitors to Geneva did note that its justice was harsh in its punishment of sin, sexual sin in particular. Men and women, both the humble and the wealthy, were punished for a wide variety of sex crimes, including fornication, adultery, sodomy, bigamy, and incest. For the first century after the establishment of the Genevan Reformation, the Small Council had even been willing to call elite men out for impregnating their servants, insisting that these fathers pay paternity support to the local *hôpital*,²² which functioned as an orphanage.²³ By the 1670s and 80s, however,

18. Bernard Lescaze, "Entre le glaive and et la balance," in *Vivre à Genève autour de 1600*, 2: 125–47.

19. Robert Oresko, "The Question of the Sovereignty of Geneva after the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis," in *Republiken und Republikanismus im Europa des Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut G. Koenigsberger and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1988), 77–99.

20. Bernard Schnapper, "La répression pénale au XVIème siècle. L'exemple du Parlement de Bordeaux," in *Voies nouvelles en histoire de droit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 53–105; Joy Wiltenburg, "The Carolina and the Culture of the Common Man: Revisiting the Imperial Penal Code of 1532," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 713–34.

21. Erich Hans Kaden, *Le juriconsulte Germain Colladon, ami de Jean Calvin et de Theodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Georg, 1974); and Lescaze, "L'organisation politique."

22. John Witte Jr. and Robert Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Liliane Mottu-Weber, "'Paillardises,' 'anticipation,' et mariage de réparation à Genève au XVIIIe siècle," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 52 (2002): 430–47; Karen Spierling, "Putting Order to Disorder," in *Dire l'interdit*, ed. Raymond Mentzer, Françoise Moreil, and Philippe Chareyre (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 43–62.

23. Gabriella Cahier-Buccelli, "L'Hôpital Général de Genève à une époque charnière (1676–1712)," in *Sauver l'âme*, 154–73.

the Small Council preferred to brush some male elite extramarital sex under the table and instead hold the young mothers solely responsible for their illegitimate children. In addition, the Genevan *hôpital* only very rarely allowed single mothers to give birth in its facility, a service that some more charitable French and German institutions provided when faced with poor mothers who had nowhere else to go.²⁴ These regulatory realities had a profound effect on single pregnant women who were left with few viable options other than abandonment and infanticide.

In Geneva, no local statutes made specific reference to the crime of infanticide.²⁵ Given that no clear local definition of the crime existed, analysis of its prosecution relies entirely on inferences from recorded judicial practice. Sixteenth-century trials of suspicious infant deaths refer to the crime as murder: when in 1595 single mother Elizabeth Jacon was convicted of “having murdered her own child by throwing it into the latrine, a horrible crime warranting severe punishment,” she was sentenced to have her hand cut off and to be drowned.²⁶ By the early seventeenth century, most final sentences refer to the crime specifically as “parricide,” though by the 1670s the term “infanticide” was also commonplace.²⁷ Perhaps because of the absence of local legislation, Genevan authorities seem to have been strongly influenced by a 1532 German statute (the “Carolina”) and a 1556 French edict that defined infanticide as a specific form of homicide and deemed the secret births of unmarried women to be actionable even without the discovery of a corpse. Evidence that a woman had given birth secretly and that the child had died was considered sufficient proof of her guilt to justify an investigation and, in some cases, a conviction.²⁸ In Geneva, single women were required to declare their pregnancies to the consistory, and midwives were mandated to extract the names of fathers from single mothers during childbirth. These laws were, however, more honored in the breach than in the observance, and no statute required that negligence result in criminal prosecution for infanticide.²⁹ By the seventeenth century, however, Genevan authorities did

24. Hardwick, *Sex in an Old Regime City*; and Rublack, “Pregnancy, Childbirth,” 88–91.

25. Émile Rivoire and Victor van Berchem, eds. *Les sources du droit du canton de Genève*, 4 vols. (Aarau: H. R. Sauerländer, 1927–35).

26. AEG PC 2° Série 1779, final sentence; William G. Naphy, “Secret Pregnancy and Presumptions of Guilt,” in *Politics, Gender and Belief*, ed. Amy Nelson Burdett, Kathleen Comerford, and Karin Maag (Geneva: Droz, 2014), 265–87.

27. AEG PC 1° Série 2841; RC 177, f. 146 (April 4, 1677).

28. Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide*, 22–27; Soman, “Anatomy,” 250; and Alison Rowlands, “‘In Great Secrecy’: The Crime of Infanticide in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, 1501–1618,” *German History* 2 (1997): 181–99.

29. Mottu-Weber, “‘Paillardises.’” Single mothers could be prosecuted in the absence of an infant corpse, but most of these trials were inconclusive. See AEG PC 1° Série 2435; and

begin prosecuting more single mothers for allegedly killing their children and, in practice, employed similar evidentiary standards to do so as did French and German jurists. If the authorities discovered an unidentified dead baby, witness testimony was gathered, surgeons examined the corpse, and midwives inspected the body of the suspected single mother for telltale signs of a recent birth. Once enough evidence linking the mother and child was amassed, the Small Council arrested the suspected mother and questioned her. Like judges in other European jurisdictions, the councilors sought to establish whether she had recently given birth, whether the baby had been born alive, how it died, and whether she had intentionally caused its death.³⁰

In 1691, the mistress of Jacquema Roch reported her to the authorities. Suspicious that Jacquema was pregnant, her mistress woke one night to find her in the latrines having just given birth and about to throw the baby in.³¹ The baby was still alive at the time but died later that day. Midwives examined the corpse and established that the baby had died of blood loss, the result of Jacquema having ripped off the umbilical cord.³² This medical testimony still left open the question of whether the death was accidental or intentional. Jacquema denied having killed her infant and variously claimed that she did not know that she was pregnant, that she had assumed that the baby was born dead because she had not felt it move within her, that she had accidentally ripped the umbilical cord off, and that she had intended to baptize the child as a Catholic.³³ Her multiple and seemingly contradictory defenses were analogous to arguments made by women prosecuted for infanticide in France and Germany, jurisdictions in which establishing the mother's intention to harm the baby was crucial to justifying a capital sentence.³⁴ Jacquema's claims to ignorance about the birthing process and safe methods for removing the umbilical cord, which implied that the baby's death was accidental, were rendered implausible by

AEG PC 1° Série 2841. Married mothers were also sometimes investigated, although they were rarely convicted. See AEG PC 1° Série 2533.

30. Jilek, "Infanticide." When the Small Council did not establish a full proof of guilt, the woman was usually flogged and banished. See for example AEG PC 1° Série 2795; and AEG PC 1° Série 4469.

31. AEG PC 1° Série 4876, testimony of Marthe Blanc, May 4, 1691.

32. AEG PC 1° Série 4820, summary of the trial, June 2, 1691.

33. AEG PC 1° Série 4876, interrogations of Jacquema Roch May 13, May 15, May 26, May 27, 1691.

34. Jilek, "Infanticide"; Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide*, 55–65; Bongert, "L'infanticide;" and Justine Semmens, "Rousing him with Wine: The Prosecution of Infanticide and the Application of Reasonable Doubt at the Parlement of Paris, 1550–1650," unpublished paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference (October 2019).

the fact that this baby was her third illegitimate child and that the fate of the earlier two children could not be established. Despite Jacquema's refusal to confess, the Small Council decided to rely on the medical evidence and the testimony of her mistress to convict her. In this trial, as in many others, the information produced by the corpse of the infant, confirmed by a medical expert, was as salient to the conviction as the mother's admission of guilt.

Despite the lack of specific legislation mandating aggressive prosecution, Geneva was vigorous in its punishment of mothers convicted of killing their bastard children. Infanticide trials began to mushroom in the seventeenth century just as prosecutions of women for other moral or spiritual crimes, such as adultery and witchcraft, dropped off, and as criminal justice overall was becoming less violent.³⁵ Whereas in the early 1620s, the Small Council executed an average of four individuals per year for all crimes, after 1650 the overall execution rate dropped precipitously to less than one per year, even as the frequency of capital sentences for infanticide increased.³⁶ Between 1650 and 1699, executions of women convicted of infanticide or of poisoning their child constituted 92% (eleven of twelve) of female executions and 37% of all executions in Geneva.³⁷ In contrast to German and Dutch jurisdictions, in which less than 50% of infanticide prosecutions led to executions, in Geneva, eighteen of the twenty-eight single mothers (64%) convicted during the seventeenth century were executed.³⁸ When faced with the right circumstances—a single mother who had recently given birth in secret and the body of an apparently murdered newborn discovered in the city—the Small Council used all means at its disposal to establish her guilt.³⁹ Yet, during these same

35. Christian Broye, *Sorcellerie et superstitions à Genève: XVIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Geneva: Concept Moderne, 1990); Jilek, "Infanticide;" and Sara Beam, "Adultère, indices médicaux et recul de la torture à Genève (XVIIe siècle)," *Genre & Histoire* 16 (2015).

36. In 1621, for example, four individuals were executed: AEG PC 1^e Série 2505; AEG PC 1^e Série 2529; AEG PC 1^e Série 2531; AEG PC 1^e Série 2537; and Jean-François Pillet, "Tellement que l'âme soit séparée du corp': la peine capitale à Genève au XVIIe siècle" (Master's thesis, University of Geneva, 1994), 13–18, 77–79.

37. Pillet, "Tellement que l'âme soit séparée du corp'"; and Jilek, "Infanticide."

38. Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide*, 50–53; Manon van der Heijden, *Women and Crime in Early Modern Holland* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 53–56; Porret, "Crime des filles séduites"; and Richard van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror: Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 138–42.

39. The percentage of women convicted of infanticide who were then executed declined in the eighteenth century in Geneva, as elsewhere. Michel Porret, *Le crime et ses circonstances* (Geneva: Droz, 1995), 217; Soman, "Anatomy;" Hardwick, *Sex in an Old Regime City*; Joel F. Harrington, *The Unwanted Child* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 305–11; and Mary Nagle Wessling, "Infanticide Trials and Forensic Medicine, Württembergs 1757–93," in *Legal Medicine in History*, ed. Michael Clark and Catherine Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117–44.

decades, the Small Council simultaneously turned a blind eye to many suspicious infant deaths in the surrounding countryside even though many of these deaths occurred within its jurisdiction.

The reluctance of the Small Council to prosecute single mothers like Louise Bouffa may have been in part a practical legal decision based on the fact that it would have been difficult to establish full proof of guilt in her case. Without an infant corpse, it would have been near impossible to satisfy the evidentiary standards needed to justify issuing a capital sentence, including proving conclusively that the child had been born alive. Yet this explanation is not entirely persuasive. Something more than evidentiary standards was at work. Even explicit accounts of suspected infanticide emanating from the surrounding villages were sometimes met with a laconic judicial response. In 1675, the consistory received a report from the *châtelain* of St. Victor, a judicial official representing Geneva in its rural territories, that Jeanne Mestral, formerly a servant in Geneva and long-time inhabitant of the Genevan village of Laconnex, was suspected of “having lost her child to poison and then buried it in the garden.”⁴⁰ The *châtelain* had the corpse exhumed from under a tree, but in the meantime, Jeanne went into hiding somewhere “in the vicinity.” The Genevan consistory was sufficiently concerned that it summoned the alleged father, her master Charles Combes, who claimed to have no knowledge of the child and informed the pastors that he would be leaving town for an extended period on business.⁴¹ With both parents no longer city residents, the Small Council showed no interest in pursuing the case. Suspicious deaths of illegitimate infants in the countryside were not considered a high priority.

The Small Council instead focused its efforts on preventing unmarried women from giving birth in the city at all. Employers who failed to report that their servants were pregnant faced reprimands and occasionally were held responsible for paying for the upkeep of the child.⁴² Widows were punished if they knowingly housed unmarried pregnant women, and midwives were forbidden to aid at illegitimate births in the city: both Jeanne Dufour, widow of Jean Poinard, and Pernette Fol, a midwife, were chastised and fined for having helped a young woman from the nearby Vaud region give birth in 1677.⁴³ By outlawing the provision of shelter and support, the Small Council strongly encouraged pregnant women who could not convince their sexual partners to marry them to leave town.

40. AEG R. Consist. 62, f. 22 (April 1, 1675).

41. AEG R. Consist. 62, f. 26 (April 22, 1675).

42. AEG RC 178, f. 180 (May 18, 1678); and AEG R. Consist. 62, f. 7 (February 11, 1675).

43. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 45v–46 (July 26 to August 3, 1677); and AEG RC 177, f. 316–18 (August 14, 1677).

Prosecuting these women for fornication had the additional benefit of indicating that the city would not contribute public funds to help raise their bastard children. Earlier in the seventeenth century, unmarried pregnant women sometimes initiated contact with the Small Council with the aim of petitioning the father for child support.⁴⁴ Such petitions had often been successful, but by the 1670s, most fathers avoided paying. Occasionally, fathers did willingly take responsibility for the child: when in 1677 Pierre Blanc, a stable hand for the Favre family in Jussy, was arrested for fornication with Bernarde Santa, he freely admitted to the crime.⁴⁵ As a result, the Small Council sentenced him to 9 days in prison and charged him with the upkeep of the child. Other fathers persistently refused to acknowledge paternity: Pierre Suchard, arrested for having had extramarital sex with Jacqueline Berlie, was held responsible for paying a wet nurse to care for their child. He refused to do so, however, and repeatedly contested the conviction over the next several months; there is no evidence that he ever admitted his paternity or paid any support.⁴⁶ In the 1670s and 80s, many pregnant women were arrested alone and were left with full responsibility for supporting the baby. Some pregnant women refused to name their sexual partners or claimed that the fathers were transients who had left town. As will be discussed, some of these claims were probably false and were designed to protect a local man from prosecution. Michée Ribaud first tried to deny that she was pregnant at all and then claimed that the father was a foreigner who no longer lived in Geneva.⁴⁷ As a result, the Small Council sentenced Michée to support the child and additionally banished her from the city. All told, in 1677 alone, the Small Council deemed eight women guilty of fornication to be solely responsible for the upkeep of their illegitimate offspring, whereas only one father, mentioned previously, agreed to maintain his bastard.⁴⁸ Given that these women would lose their jobs as a result of the pregnancy,

44. AEG PC 1° Série 2991; AEG PC 1° Série 3303; and AEG PC 1° Série 3400.

45. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 39 (June 28, 1677); and AEG RC 177, f. 270 (July 4, 1677).

46. AEG RC 178, f. 37 (January 23, 1678); AEG RC 178, f. 129 (April 2, 1678); and AEG RC 178, f. 386 (December 10, 1678).

47. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 58 (September 27, 1677); and AEG RC 177, f. 445 (November 23, 1677).

48. AEG RC 177, f. 362 (September 17, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 473 (December 12, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 345, f. 353 (September 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 430 (November 9, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 495 (December 29, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 445 (November 23, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 461–62 (December 5, 1677); and AEG RC 177, f. 61–62 (February 5, 1677). The Small Council also charged two couples with joint responsibility and insisted that they marry immediately. AEG RC 177, f. 335 (September 1, 1677); AEG RC 177, f. 274 (July 6, 1677).

it is not surprising that most left the city to give birth in villages where the scrutiny of the Small Council was less vigilant.⁴⁹

After the birth, some women returned to Geneva to drop off their babies in prominent locations where they might be discovered, or asked a third party to do so for them. Every year, the Small Council reported that a handful of babies whose parents could not be identified were abandoned in or near Geneva.⁵⁰ The *hôpital* took these infants in, arranged to have them baptized, and sent them out to wet nurses paid for by the city.⁵¹ The Small Council did what it could to avoid making these payments by aggressively investigating the identity of all abandoned children. In 1685, Marie Reymond was caught abandoning her sister's illegitimate child, born in nearby Meyrin, when she brought the infant to the Genevan *hôpital* claiming that she had found the baby on the road. She and the baby were recognized, however, and the infant was returned to its mother.⁵² Pernette Girod also tried to abandon her infant by attaching a label to its clothes indicating that the father was Abraham Escar, a local tailor. She was caught doing so, however; Escar denied paternity and refused to take any responsibility for the infant. In response, the Small Council absolved him, returned the baby to Pernette, and forced her to leave the city within 3 days.⁵³

The Small Council was clearly concerned that the city had an expensive reputation for charity and, indeed, several women admitted to having heard rumors that the city would raise the infant if they abandoned it near a city gate.⁵⁴ In 1666, Antoina Sauget, previously a wet nurse in Geneva, was working in the household of Genevan oligarch Théophile Sarasin when she became pregnant. She gave birth to twin boys whom she raised for 2 months until she could no longer afford to do so. One day she and another woman put the boys in baskets and left them in nearby Gex hoping that they would be found. Antoina might well have gotten away with abandoning the boys had she not moved to Geneva herself where she quickly found work as a servant in the household of a local doctor. Someone tipped

49. By the mid-eighteenth century, the financial responsibility for illegitimate children often fell to the father in Geneva. Aquillon, "Hélène Chambras"; Loraine Chappuis, "Enquêteur, baptiser, réprimer: le contrôle de la bâtardise à Genève au XVIIIe siècle (1750–1770)," *Crime, Histoire et Sociétés* 18 (2014): 57–79.

50. AEG RC 178, f. 3 (January 7, 1678); and AEG RC 178, f. 186 (May 24, 1678).

51. Trabichet, "'Tant que l'on nourrit,'" 63–65; and Camille Dominici Verdier, "'Les enfants de la ville': le consulat montpellierain et ses nourrices à l'aube du XVIe siècle," *Annales du Midi* 127 (2015): 349–66.

52. AEG PC 2^e Série 2847.

53. AEG RC 178, f. 208 (June 12 1678), f. 210 (June 14, 1678).

54. AEG PC 1^e Série 4476.

off the authorities that the twins were hers. When arrested and asked why she had abandoned her children, she explained that “not having the means to feed them, she was advised by various people to bring them to this place where they would be raised in the fear of God.”⁵⁵ During her interrogation, it became clear that this was not the first time Antoina had given birth. Because of her recidivism, Antoina was reunited with her sons, flogged, forced to apologize on bent knee, and permanently banished from the city. It is likely that she abandoned the boys again in a location where neither she nor the children would have been recognized.

Taken together, infanticide, fornication, and abandonment prosecutions made it clear to single mothers that their bastard children were not welcome in the city. The Small Council clearly envisioned that these women would return home to the villages from whence they originated. When Gabrielle Boyer, convicted of fornication by the Small Council, was caught in Geneva living with a widow late in her pregnancy, she was reprimanded and told to go to the village of Perron to give birth in her sister-in-law’s home.⁵⁶ The idea that these women would return to their families may have assuaged the consciences of the councilors, but there is little evidence that most poor immigrant women did so.⁵⁷ Many women left the city only briefly to return again to work as servants or wet nurses, occupations that were normally incompatible with living with their children.⁵⁸ Jeanne Françoise Bétemps, convicted of fornication, left Geneva and “returned to her home” in the Vaud region northeast of Geneva to give birth to her illegitimate child. Within a few months, she was back in Geneva working as a wet nurse for a member of the Small Council.⁵⁹ No reference is made to the whereabouts of the child. Jeanne Goffroy, originally from Beau Regard in Chablais on the south side of Lake Geneva, became pregnant with a fellow servant while working for a miller in the city. Jeanne left Geneva in late December 1678 to give birth in Ste. Cergues, on the north shore of Lake Geneva, far from her family, where she claimed to have left the child with a wet nurse. Less than a

55. AEG PC 1^e Série 3871, interrogation of Antoina Sauget, May 5, 1666.

56. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 82v (November 1, 1677).

57. A few women returned home and remained there to raise their child. See AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 51v–52 (August 23, 1677). The only account I have come across of a woman claiming to have left her infant with her family in the countryside was not deemed credible. AEG 4876, May 13, 1691 interrogation of Jaquima Roch.

58. Klapisch-Zuber, “Blood Parents”; and Rebecca Lynn Winer, “The Mother and the Dida [Nanny],” in *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations*, ed. Jutta Spierling (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 59–63. A few single mothers lived at the house of correction with their infants. See AEG RC 178, f. 184 (May 22, 1678).

59. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 6v (March 15, 1677); and AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 52v (August 28 1677).

month later, she returned to Geneva where she was hired by the Mallet family to nurse their child.⁶⁰ When the Small Council caught Pernette Brochet abandoning her illegitimate child in a field outside Geneva, the councilors asked why she had come to the city. She explained that “having nothing at her home nor any refuge, she preferred to come here where she thought she would be able to make a living.”⁶¹ Despite the best efforts of the Small Council to send women away, the financial pressures that had drawn them to Geneva in the first place, and the attraction of paid employment that might allow them to save for a trousseau so that they might someday marry and form a respectable household, were no less pressing once they had given birth.⁶²

Notably, these unmarried mothers did not explain that they had left their newborns with family in the countryside. When pressed by the pastors to account for an absent child, they instead claimed that the child had died, that they had given their child away, or that the child was in the care of a wet nurse. These explanations were calculated to satisfy the moral imperatives of the consistory, which sought evidence of maternal goodwill and repentance, and the practical concerns of the Small Council, which sought assurance that these children would place no demands on the local orphanage. Although some of these children may well have been thriving, there is good reason to suspect that these explanations were sometimes a means to avoid admitting that the children had been abandoned or killed.

We know about these women and their survival strategies because the Genevan consistory was an active, confident church court that aggressively regulated morals in the city and environs. During the second half of the seventeenth century, it kept busy chasing down individuals who had abandoned the Reformed church for Catholicism, chastising youth who fought in the city streets, reprimanding city residents who attended Catholic festivals, and handling marital disputes, requests for divorce, and reports of extramarital sex. Since its founding in 1541, the consistory had been staffed by pastors and by an equal number of lay elders chosen from the various political councils.⁶³ Whereas during the height of the Reformation a century earlier, the consistory and the Small Council had

60. AEG R. Consist 63, f. 172 (December 19, 1678); and AEG RC 179, f. 33 (January 25, 1679).

61. AEG PC 1^e Série 4962, interrogation of Pernette Brochet, February 14, 1693.

62. Sara Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 61–72; and Regina Schulte, *The Village in Court: Arson, Infanticide, and Poaching in the Court Records of Upper Bavaria, 1848–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 183–200.

63. Christian Grosse, *Les rituels de la cène* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 337–423; Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),

worked together to identify and punish even elite fornicators and adulterers, by the 1670s, the priorities of the two institutions had diverged.

Although it frowned on all sexual profligacy, the consistory was nevertheless complicit in creating a regulatory environment that made it possible for single mothers to return to the city without their children and find employment, often as wet nurses. Wealthy families in early modern Geneva hired young women to live in their homes as wet nurses; unlike most artisan families who sent their infants out to wet nurse in country villages, the wealthy preferred to keep their children nearby.⁶⁴ Most such live-in wet nurses were young single women who had recently given birth: city regulations warned against families hiring prostitutes as wet nurses and they were also forbidden to hire Catholics, which was a real limitation as many women who moved to Geneva for work came from France or Savoy.⁶⁵ But even if by definition unmarried wet nurses were considered disreputable, they were nonetheless not only allowed but actively encouraged by the consistory to live and work in the city. As early as 1547, the consistory wrote to the Small Council urging it not to imprison or banish unmarried pregnant women, particularly after they had given birth, “because they were wet nurses.”⁶⁶ Instead, the pastors urged the Small Council to release these women into their care so that they could be publicly humiliated at Sunday services and then presumably find honest work. This tradition continued in the seventeenth century: even though the consistory held single mothers to account for their sexual sin, it also provided these young women a spiritual gateway for their reintegration into Genevan society.

The consistory sometimes facilitated their efforts to secure work, acting as a “wet-nurse broker.” Because the market for wet nurses seems to have been tight, some pregnant single mothers were able to arrange a wet-nursing position before leaving Geneva to give birth: in 1678, Jean Antoine Lullin, the wealthiest man in Geneva at the time, asked the consistory to locate a young woman who had contracted to become a wet nurse for a member of his family.⁶⁷ She had been working as a servant at a local tavern when she became pregnant, and had gone to Gex for the birth, but had not yet returned to the city. The consistory did not

182–220; Liliane Mottu-Weber, “L’Église,” and “Les fidèles face aux lois des hommes et de Dieu,” in *Vivre à Genève autour de 1600*, 2: 149–72, 173–208.

64. Trabichet, “‘Tant que l’on nourrit,’” 53–55.

65. Rivoire and Berchem, eds. *Sources du droit*, 4: 111, 4: 437, 4: 467.

66. *Ibid.*, 2: 512.

67. Anne-Marie Piuze, “Les plus riches des genevois,” in *A Genève et autour de Genève aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Lausanne: Payot, 1985), 209.

know where she was, but promised to keep its eyes and ears open for news and did make some efforts to locate her.⁶⁸ Because people knew that the consistory kept close tabs on illegitimate births, the pastors and elders unwittingly put themselves in the position of facilitating the matching of single mothers with wealthy families needing nursing services. The fact that the consistory openly encouraged the subsequent employment of repentant single mothers left the pastors well disposed to accept the sometimes implausible explanations that these women gave about the fates of their missing children. The consistory refrained from asking detailed questions about their infants and instead focused on reconciling them with God and holding the fathers of their children equally accountable.

The consistory was usually reassured when single mothers testified that their illegitimate infants had been baptized. It clearly preferred that women give birth in a Protestant area and baptize them within the Reformed church, although it acknowledged all baptisms as valid. In 1675, Jacques Chartier and his wife Marguerite were summoned because their daughter had left the city to give birth. When the consistory discovered that she had done so in Catholic St. Julien, it insisted that the parents fetch her and take her to Lancy “to the home of an honest woman of our faith,” where the child would be raised as a Protestant.⁶⁹ Noting that the child had been baptized was an important element of many narratives in which the mother claimed that the child then unexpectedly died. Baptism ensured salvation for the infant, but it also indicated that the birth had not been entirely secret and that the mother had made efforts to provide for the spiritual welfare of her child. Françoise Girou, whose infant only survived 2 days, reported that she had given birth in the Vaud, a Protestant region northeast of Geneva, where the child was baptized by Monsieur Pinant in the village of Bossey.⁷⁰ Similarly, Catherine Bailliard was able to prove in 1679 that her illegitimate child had been baptized by minister Dufour before “God took him a few days after the birth.”⁷¹ Michée Dunant and her mother offered a less convincing narrative of the birth of her infant, but still claimed that the newborn had been baptized. Michée’s mother testified to having left the city with her daughter late in her pregnancy, with the intention to travel to Chambéry in Catholic Savoy in order for Michée to marry the father of her child. Instead, during the voyage, Michée unexpectedly gave birth in a grain

68. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 171–171v (December 17, 1678); and AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 176 (December 26, 1678).

69. AEG R. Consist. 62, f. 40v (June 17, 1675).

70. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 156–57 (August 22–29, 1678).

71. AEG R. Consist. 64, f. 11v (March 6, 1679).

mill near Rumilly and a local Catholic woman baptized it before the infant died a few hours later.⁷² This story, difficult to verify, nevertheless contained essential elements that satisfied the consistory that Michée had done her best for the child and had not intended for it to die.

The consistory exhibited very little interest in the details of infant deaths. They rarely asked how and why the child had died, whether it had been sick for long, or where it was buried. When an unnamed servant of Sieur Paschal reported that she had given birth to an illegitimate child in the rural home of Monsieur Fenin Gendre de Lunati who then “died the day after his birth even though he was born very much alive,” the consistory did not question her account, although it did refer her to the Small Council, which imprisoned her briefly for fornication.⁷³ Pernette Truffas reported that, after she gave birth, “her child then died right away”; she too was imprisoned by the Small Council in order to ascertain where the child was buried, but was released a few days later.⁷⁴ When the consistory deemed the death suspicious, the pastors did refer the single mother for prosecution, but I have yet to find an instance when the Small Council chose to investigate the fate of the child.

The consistory held not only the mothers but also the fathers of illegitimate children to account.⁷⁵ Its investigations revealed a well-established practice of wealthy men buying off the servants they had impregnated with promises of short-term financial support to pay for the birth and the subsequent weeks of recovery.⁷⁶ The servants were paid between 1 and 10 *écus* in order to keep their mouths shut, claim the father was a non-resident who could not be traced, and leave the city to give birth.⁷⁷ The consistory was disturbed by this practice: they put pressure on the fathers, many of whom were already married, to confess to their sexual misdeeds and take responsibility for their illegitimate children. The pastors and elders expended considerable efforts to try to identify these elite fathers. In 1685, the pastors and elders discovered that recidivist criminal Daniel Duteil had acted as a fixer for the Adamcourt family. At the request of the parents of suspected fornicator Théophile Adamcourt, Duteil had

72. AEG R. Consist. 64, f. 48v (September 25, 1679).

73. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 156 (August 22, 1678).

74. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 162v (October 3, 1678); AEG RC 178, f. 317 (September 13, 1678); and AEG RC 178, f. 322 (September 21, 1678).

75. Mottu-Weber, “Paillardises.”

76. Maza, *Servants*, 89–94; and Suzannah Lipscomb, *The Voices of Nîmes: Women, Sex, and Marriage in Reformation Languedoc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 230–73.

77. The average daily wage for a woman in Geneva was between 3 and 7 *sols* in the early seventeenth century. One *écu* therefore represented 2 months' salary for a working woman. Anne Marie Piuze, “Salaires, prix, monnaie,” in *Vivre à Genève autour de 1600*, 1: 213–217.

visited the father of pregnant Jeanne Pernette Pinget to try to buy her off for the high price of 10 *écus*.⁷⁸ She refused the offer and instead sued for paternity support. In the end, once the Small Council determined that Jeanne Pernette already had two children out of wedlock, she was flogged and banished from the city. But Théophile Adamcourt and another man, presumably also a sexual partner, were required to pay for the child's maintenance costs.⁷⁹ The fact that the Adamcourt family had resorted to hiring a known criminal to negotiate with Jeanne Pernette may have embarrassed the Small Council to act in this instance against a prominent Genevan family.

A minority of these wealthy fathers did right by the servants they impregnated by either supporting the infant or by abandoning it on the mother's behalf. In 1686, the consistory was scandalized to discover that one of the wealthiest men in the city, César de Saussure, had impregnated a young woman named St. Onge, arranged for her to give birth outside of the city, and was now paying for the child to be kept at a wet nurse nearby.⁸⁰ The consistory accused him of continuing to meet with St. Onge at public houses in Geneva. Pierre Malacreda, who got his servant pregnant, paid for the child to be nursed for several years, to the considerable distress of his wife, who complained repeatedly to the consistory about his behavior.⁸¹ In 1678, pastry chef Jean Pernet abandoned his wife and children, leaving town with his female servant who was suspected of being pregnant. When Pernet and the servant returned a few months later, without the baby, Pernet neatly solved the problem by denying all knowledge of the pregnancy to the consistory; the Small Council, although notified, did not act in this instance.⁸² The consistory summoned all of these fathers with the hope that they would apologize for their sexual immorality. Malacreda did so, Pernet appeared but denied all wrongdoing, and De Saussure did not bother to show up. Whereas during the Reformation period, elite men sometimes accepted correction from the consistory, by the 1670s they knew that they could ignore its summons with impunity.⁸³ Most single mothers who were summoned did appear, however. They knew that their right to remain in the city was contingent

78. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 112v (July 29, 1686).

79. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 54 (December 24, 1685); AEG RC 185, f. 186v (December 25, 1685); AEG RC 186, f. 162 (June 9, 1686).

80. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 72v–73 (February 25, 1686).

81. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 67v–70 (February 11, 1686); and AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 80 (March 25, 1686).

82. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 166–166v (November 14–21, 1678).

83. Bernard Lescaze, "'Funus consistori, o miserere!' L'égalité de traitement devant le consistoire de Genève autour de 1600," in *Sous l'oeil du consistoire*, ed. Christian

on doing so. They also probably knew that the consistory would be somewhat sympathetic to their narratives of being bribed by their employers and forced, in some instances, to give their babies away.

Some single mothers claimed that the elite fathers of their illegitimate children arranged to give the babies away to a third party who would then leave town, presumably to kill or abandon the infant. Most of the time, we hear about these mothers and babies when these arrangements did not work out. Margotton Bourgeois, who died a few days after giving birth, confessed on her deathbed that her former employer Pierre Cassin had got her pregnant and had promised to pay for the birth if she hid his paternity and gave the child away immediately. She did give the baby away to a “foreign textile worker,” but exposed Cassin when he failed to pay her the entire sum promised.⁸⁴ The consistory investigated Cassin, who denied being the father of Margotton’s child, despite his own servants’ extensive testimony to the contrary, and tried to pin paternity on a third man (who also refused to acknowledge the now abandoned child); the Small Council did not prosecute.⁸⁵ Servant Elizabeth Fillon was appalled when the father of her child and her employer, lacemaker Raymond Narphin, offered to give her 6 *écus* to pay for the birth as long as she gave their child away and never returned to the city herself. In a heated altercation overheard by several witnesses, Fillon made it clear that she had expected Narphin to pay for a wet nurse for their child and had anticipated returning to Geneva with him after the birth. He refused to have anything further to do with her and ended up fleeing; Elizabeth also fled but first abandoned the baby at the gates of Geneva where it was found and identified; both parents were flogged in effigy.⁸⁶

The seeming prevalence of this sort of financial arrangement should make us wary of believing women who claimed during fornication investigations that the father was an unknown man who had already left town. In need of cash to pay for the birth, these pregnant women took what their sexual partners offered them and lied to the authorities about the paternity of their children. That said, we cannot assume that all single mothers who returned to Geneva with a bastard claiming that the father was a prominent citizen were telling the truth either. Making such a claim refocused the

Grosse, Danièle Tosato-Rigo, and Nicole Staremborg Goy (Lausanne: Étude de lettres, 2004), 41–55.

84. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 87v–88 (November 29, 1677); and AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 89v–90 (December 6, 1677).

85. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 92 (December 13, 1677); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 114–114v (March 14, 1678); AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 140v (June 20, 1678); and AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 145 (July 4, 1678).

86. AEG PC 1^e Série 4801.

pastors' attention on the sins of the father and sometimes enabled the mother to avoid a referral for criminal prosecution to the Small Council.

Other women openly admitted to having given their infant away to the father, who was usually a foreigner or had left town with the child. Jeanne Barbier was summoned to the consistory in 1686 for having had a child 7 years after her husband abandoned her. She readily admitted having done so and told the consistory that she had given the infant to the father, Jacob Lianna, a jewelry maker who had subsequently moved away from Geneva. Jeanne was denied communion but was allowed to return to the church 4 months later.⁸⁷ Similarly, the consistory accused a female servant of Antoine Villars of having given her child to a Catholic journeyman baker. Her employers vouched for her that she had given birth in the Vaud and had given the infant to its father, who was Catholic and had been briefly employed by the Villars family.⁸⁸ The question of what the father did with the child once he received it was never broached: as he had left town and was no longer a member of any local congregation, the consistory made no effort to investigate further regarding the fate of these missing children. Whereas elite male citizens could count on the Small Council not to ask any questions about the fates of their illegitimate children, men of the middling classes knew that they could be held accountable for the whereabouts of their offspring and often chose to leave town instead.

Single mothers who returned to Geneva without their children often explained that their infants were being cared for by a wet nurse. As elsewhere, wet nursing was an entirely normative practice in seventeenth-century Geneva, but it was also expensive. Only the wealthiest Genevan families could afford to hire a wet nurse who would live in their household; many artisan families sent their children to be cared for by wet nurses in nearby villages, often in Catholic areas.⁸⁹ The cost of these rural wet nurses was presumably much lower than the pay earned by wet nurses working in elite homes.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the cost of paying for a wet nurse was usually more than a female servant could afford.

Claims that illegitimate children were being cared for by a wet nurse were most convincing when it was clear that the single mother's family

87. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 62–62v (January 28, 1686); and AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 97 (May 20, 1686).

88. AEG R. Consist. 64, f. 44 (September 4, 1679).

89. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 125 (May 9, 1678); and AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 99 (January 3, 1678).

90. Debra Blumenthal, "With my Daughter's Milk: Wet Nurses and the Rhetoric of Lactation in Valencian Court Records," in *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations*, 101–14; Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents"; and Trabichet, "'Tant que l'on nourrit,'" 46–47.

was helping to support the baby. When the daughter of Élie Udri was found to have had an illegitimate child in 1679, she was reported to the consistory. A local pastor confirmed that Élie's daughter had given birth to an illegitimate child 1 month earlier "at the home of the Barbiers" in Aire, that her father Élie had presented the child for baptism in nearby Petit Saconnex, and that the child was currently at a wet nurse in the village of Lancy.⁹¹ Madeleine Aléon, daughter of well-established citizen Pierre Aléon, was offended when summoned to the consistory in 1675 to explain the whereabouts of her illegitimate child. She explained that her fiancé had not married her and righteously announced that the baby had been born in Grange Collomb "at the home of Monsieur Carlot," was given the name Antoine, was baptized in Bossey by the Minister Badolet, and was being nursed nearby.⁹² Some respectable Genevan families clearly chose to pay to have illegitimate children nursed in the nearby countryside.

Other accounts were less plausible, both because they lack specific details and because it was not clear how these working mothers would have been able to pay a wet nurse from their meager salaries. Charlotte de Cometière, a servant for a local professor, admitted having left the city to have a child "that she was having nursed" in an unspecified location.⁹³ Marie Manget claimed that she gave birth in Savoy some months earlier and had left the child there "with a wet nurse."⁹⁴ When asked about the father, she claimed that he was a foreign soldier who had long since left the region. Madeleine Decarro claimed that her child, born of an illegitimate union, was living with a wet nurse in the Catholic village of Veigy.⁹⁵ Claiming that one's child was being cared for by a rural wet nurse far enough away that it would be difficult to verify nevertheless satisfied the consistory; these women were generally excluded from communion but were not referred to the Small Council for prosecution. We know that rates of mortality for infants in the care of wet nurses were very high, so it is likely that these mothers did not need to pay the wet nurse for long.⁹⁶

Wet nurses who failed to be paid complained and sometimes returned the child to the mother.⁹⁷ Claudine Barrachin was a widow living in

91. AEG R. Consist. 64, f. 35v (July 10–17, 1679).

92. AEG R. Consist. 62, f. 19 (March 30, 1675), f. 22 (April 1, 1675).

93. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 53 (December 24, 1685).

94. AEG R. Consist. 63, f. 168v (December 5, 1678).

95. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 54v (December 31, 1685).

96. Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents"; Harrington, *Unwanted Child*, 256–63; and Maria José Pérez Alvarez and Alfredo Martín García, "Nourrice mercenaires et mortalité infantile dans la ville de Leon au cours du XVIIIe siècle," *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1 (2010): 67–94.

97. AEG R. Consist. 66, f. 182 (November 11, 1686).

Sézeqgnin who sought to support her own children by nursing infants. In 1685, she agreed to take on a baby born to a young woman whom she knew had already had two previous illegitimate children.⁹⁸ She said that she had done so as a favor to a friend, who promised that the noble father of the child would pay her regularly. This did not turn out to be the case. After missing 1 month's pay, Claudine marched to Geneva to find the mother, Marion Cane, loitering near one of the city's taverns. Marion was desperate and tearful but took the child back because she manifestly had no means to pay Claudine. Instead of returning home, Claudine decided to stay the night in Geneva to try to find another infant to nurse. In the morning, she asked at the *hôpital*, where she was told that a child abandoned the night before at a bridge a few miles from the city gates needed a nurse. When they brought her the child, Claudine immediately recognized it as Marion's baby.⁹⁹ Unable to pay for a wet nurse, Marion had abandoned her baby at an intersection where she hoped it would be found. Many children born to single mothers may have ended up with a similar fate or were left in the hands of a wet nurse who neglected the child once she ceased to receive her monthly payments.

The regulatory environment established by the Small Council and consistory created push-pull incentives for single mothers. They were pushed to leave the city to give birth, but the pull of lax criminal prosecution and the lure of paid employment encouraged them to return without their children. The divergence between the interests of the consistory, which sought to reconcile these single mothers with God and the community, and of the Small Council, which had little interest in them as long as they did not kill or abandon their children in Geneva, provides a unique window into the choices faced by these women and the ways that they justified their behavior. The sources examined here strongly suggest that many single mothers abandoned their infants in order to return to Geneva for work. They were able to do so with impunity because the authorities were far more concerned with assuring a regular supply of young unmarried wet nurses to service the needs of elite Genevan families than they were with the fate of unwanted bastard children. Single mothers were not universally reviled and marginalized; their milk was too valuable for that. The survival of this evidence is unusual, but it exposes a practice that probably took place in many early modern European communities. Newborn murder was illegal in early modern Europe, but authorities were often willing to turn a blind eye to missing babies in order to profit from the labor that these young women could provide.

98. AEG PC 1^e Série 4635.

99. *Ibid.*