

A Love “Too Thick”: Slave Mothers
and Infanticide

Julie Baird

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A Love "Too Thick": Slave Mothers and Infanticide

Then, said the mournful mother,
If Ohio cannot save,
I will do a deed for freedom,
She shall find each child a grave.

I will save my precious children
From their darkly threatened doom,
I will hew their path to freedom
Through the portals of the tomb.

A moment in the sunlight,
She held a glimmering knife,
The next moment she had bathed it
In the crimson fount of life.

They snatched away the fatal knife,
Her boys shrieked wild with dread;
The baby girl was pale and cold,
They raised it up, the child was dead.

Sends this deed for fearful daring
Through my country's heart no thrill,
Do the icy hands of slavery
Every pure emotion chill?

(Frances Harper)

Readers of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* may recognize that these lines, excerpted from Francis Harper's 1859 poem "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio," depict infanticide, an act at the heart of Morrison's novel.¹ They may also know that Morrison drew her tale from a specific historical event, namely the decision of runaway slave Margaret Garner to murder her baby daughter rather than return her to slavery. And Margaret Garner was not the only slave mother to commit infanticide; there were other documented cases as well. Although this kind of murder was certainly atypical behavior among the slave population, the fact that even a small number of women chose this fate for their children disturbed and intrigued me, and I set out to discover the roots of these acts. What could possibly cause these mothers to override their deep-seated maternal instincts and kill their own children? Weren't mothers biologically wired to do anything and everything to protect their offspring? Seeking understanding, I analyzed both primary and secondary documents. Resources such as slave narratives and other firsthand accounts from this period are limited, which makes this kind of research naturally inconclusive. Nevertheless, I did manage to find and read several testimonies and confessions of infanticide, as well as descriptions of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse many slaves endured throughout their lives. What I discovered was that, for at least some of the mothers, none of whom had any legal rights or power, killing their babies was actually the only way they knew to protect them. As Frances Harper puts it in her poem, the desperate goal of these women was to "do a deed for freedom" by releasing their children from the "darkly threatened doom" of plantation life.

In January of 1856, newspapers across Cincinnati and the rest of Ohio broke the story of Margaret Garner, who, having failed to cross the Ohio River to freedom, ended

1. Frances Harper, "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio," in *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24.

the life of her infant daughter. Details of Garner's confession were revealed in the *Cincinnati Gazette*: “The mother of the dead child acknowledges that she had killed it, and that her determination was to have killed all the children, and then destroy herself, rather than return to slavery. She and the others complain of cruel treatment on the part of their master, and allege that as the cause of their attempted escape.”² In other words, it was the cruel treatment she received as a slave that drove Garner to extreme ends—first, an attempted escape, and then, when that did not work, infanticide—to save her baby from the life that awaited her. A mother killing her baby for the baby’s own good is certainly a hard concept to accept. One tendency might be to question the woman’s sanity or morality, assuming her to be some kind of insane or evil person. But the *Cincinnati Gazette* article goes on to admit that, despite her actions, Garner was a woman “of considerable intelligence of manner, and with a good address.”³

When Margaret Garner explained that her master’s abuse motivated her actions, she spoke of the widespread problem suffered by many slaves. But Garner and her children carried an extra burden: her children were not just slaves but mulatto slaves, born of the coupling between Garner and a white man. Mulattos on plantations in the antebellum South faced special threats because their very presence was a constant reminder of the infidelity of a white man (often the slave master), the humiliation of the man’s wife (often the slave mistress), and the utter helplessness of the slave woman who had been impregnated (often by rape). Because mulattos stood out as evidence of unspeakable acts, they were often sold or beaten. Thus, mothers of these babies had even more reason to fear for their futures, and potentially more reason to kill them before their futures were realized.

2. Samuel J. May, “Margaret Garner and Seven Others,” in *Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

3. *Ibid.*

For example, Lou Smith, an ex-slave, recalls when a woman killed her mulatto infant because she knew that her master and mistress had plans to sell it: “When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old, she just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up, and one day she said, ‘I just decided I’m not going to let Old Master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it.’ She got up and give it something out of a bottle, and pretty soon it was dead.”⁴ Another case of mulatto infanticide was recorded in Alabama, where a woman killed her offspring because her mistress continually abused it, more so than she abused any of the woman’s other non-mulatto children. When the mother confessed to the killing, she insisted that her master was the father of the child and said that the mistress, who had treated her youngster so cruelly, had forced her to rescue it from suffering.⁵ Once again, we see the maternal instinct to protect turned inside out: killing the child as the only perceived means of “rescuing” it from torture and abuse.

Like Margaret Garner and the other slave women we have discussed, the character of Sethe in Morrison’s famous novel *Beloved* is a mother who is unwilling to relinquish her children to the traumas of slave life and who attempts to end their lives instead. Sethe, characterized throughout the book as an extremely loving and devoted mother, succeeds in killing only one of her children, her baby girl, by slitting the child’s throat. Although Sethe is haunted by this act later in life, the novel makes clear that Sethe’s action sprang from motherly love. Paul D, Sethe’s lover later in life, calls Sethe’s past action a “rough choice” and accuses her of having a love for her children that is “too thick,” meaning perhaps a love that is too intense, extreme, or desperate: a love that clouds her judgment and leads her to commit regrettable actions. Sethe replies that

4. Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 88.

5. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York: Dix Sons, 1907), 601.

“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”⁶ In other words, for Sethe, as for many women, maternal love is thick, and messy, and potentially liable to make women act in extreme ways in order to protect their children.

Both Sethe and her real-life counterparts faced harsh judgment for committing infanticide. In general, the American public considered Margaret Garner and other slave mothers who killed their children criminals. The assumption seemed to be that the intent of these mothers was to harm, rather than to save, these children. Of course, instances of infanticide did exist where the mother’s motives were ambiguous. For instance, Mary Montgomery left her plantation and abusive master to brave the road to freedom with her child. When the journey proved too difficult with the baby in tow, Montgomery left her suckling infant behind to die.⁷ According to William Still, chairman of the Vigilance Committee of the Philadelphia Underground Railroad, it was three times as difficult for a woman to escape from slavery if she had her children with her.⁸ There are numerous cases in which women who headed for the free states left their children on the plantation or, as Mary Montgomery did, killed them en route and continued on alone. In these cases, it might be argued that the mothers had solely their own freedom at heart.

Yet to call all slave mothers who committed infanticide criminals seems a mistake. Many of the women who committed these acts gained nothing from doing so, and were likely punished severely for their insurgence. Margaret Garner, for example, had already failed in her attempted escape when she killed her child; it seems safe to assume that she did so solely to protect the girl from a lifetime of backbreaking work and numbing abuse.

6. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 164.

7. Benjamin Drew, “The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery,” in *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1969), 49.

8. William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc.* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1972), 50.

In her poem “The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio,” Frances Harper asks, “Do the icy hands of slavery / Every pure emotion chill?” In other words, do the brutalities of slavery cause a woman to lose her motherly instincts? I would argue the opposite, that many slave mothers who killed their children did so out of terror, desperation, and, hard as it may seem to understand, love. These mothers knew that no one else in the world was going to look after their babies—not their masters, not their mistresses, and certainly not the state. It was up to these women, and these women alone, to protect their precious babies from the misery of the antebellum South. It seems to me that harsh judgment should be reserved for the society that permitted and endorsed a system of slavery so cruel it turned a baby’s death into a kind of sweet release.

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