



Jeffrey Freedman. *A Poisoned Chalice*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. xv + 236 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-00233-0.



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Published on H-German (September, 2003)

Unsolved Mysteries, or the Limits of Enlightenment

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On September 12, 1776, on the General Day of Prayer and Repentance, the wine used for the purposes of communion in the main cathedral in Zurich simply did not seem right. Covered with a murky and milky white foam, it had a strange taste that some parishioners found repulsive. The sexton, tuned in to these reactions, discreetly removed the initial twelve vessels that he had poured, dispensed fresh wine and then allowed the communion service to proceed. Troubled by this apparent tampering with the symbolic blood of Christ, the church authorities embarked on an investigation. They enlisted the help of a team of medical authorities, who turned to Zurich's ruling council once they concluded what was at stake: a foiled crime of almost unprecedented proportion and unparalleled evil, an attempt to use the sacrament of communion as a means of wiping out practically the entire ruling class of Zurich as well as a large section of its citizenry.

In *A Poisoned Chalice*, Jeffrey Freedman brilliantly reconstructs the circumstances of this crime and the media spectacle it unleashed throughout German-speaking Eu-

rope in the late-eighteenth century. An example of microhistory at its best, *A Poisoned Chalice* reads like a compelling detective tale, albeit one that by necessity lacks resolution. Elegantly written and deceptive in its simplicity, Freedman's book brings the reader into the world of late-eighteenth-century Zurich, offering a multilayered reconstruction of both the alleged act of poisoning and the authorities' elusive quest to find the perpetrator and prove definitively that poison of any sort played a part in the events of September 12.

But the affair of the poisoned communion wine was much more than yet another unsolved mystery. Much of Freedman's book, accordingly, is devoted to exploring how this local crime took on a life of its own in the public sphere of its day, in the interlocking web of newspapers, journals, pamphlets and other print materials constitutive of so much Enlightenment discourse in the German-speaking world. For a brief period in 1776, indeed, coverage of the poisoning story competed with the American Revolution for the attention of the reading public, and the list of intellectual elites who put in their two cents about the affair reads like a veritable who's who

of the German Enlightenment. Johann Gottfried Herder, Christoph Martin Wieland, Isaac Iselin, Johann Joachim Spalding and many other luminaries joined in the ruminations on the affair. These debates came to a head in the battles of the pen between Johann Caspar Lavater, the Zurich theologian and a prominent critic of the *Aufklärung*, and one of the *Aufklärung*'s great champions, the Berlin author, bookseller and editor of the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, Friedrich Nicolai.

Freedman's account of the debates unleashed by the alleged poisoning of the communion wine suggests that this affair deserves a position of prominence in eighteenth-century intellectual history rivaling that traditionally assigned to the debates over the American Revolution, the controversies unleashed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's publication of the Reimarus fragments in 1774-78, or the shock effects of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. Indeed, the questions that the suspected poisoning provoked were clearly of a magnitude similar to that of these other, allegedly more major debates. In the eyes of so many eighteenth-century readers, the affair raised serious questions: questions about the problem of evil; about the authority of science and problems of evidence; about the Enlightenment's relationship to theology and the necessity of Christianity in the modern world; about political tensions in eighteenth-century Zurich; about reason's ability to triumph over prejudice; and, finally, about the prejudices implicated in the Enlightenment's faith in reason itself. In the 160 pages of his narrative, Freedman artfully shows how the story of the poisoned wine provoked fruitful and contentious debate on these larger issues. In this sense, although this is not his intent, his book offers an excellent and highly readable introduction to the German Enlightenment, one that will be as accessible to undergraduates as it will be useful to more advanced students of German history and intellectual culture.

It was not just in the issues it raised in the public sphere that the affair represented such a central event for the *Aufklärung*. As Freedman demonstrates, the ideas circulating through the channels of print in German-speaking Europe in the aftermath of the affair were often inextricable from the medium of print itself, and his book offers an important contribution to work on print culture and the Enlightenment. So much of what made the affair popular was that newspaper readers and particularly newspaper publishers recognized early on that what seemed to have happened in Zurich conformed to the generic demands of the tales of sensational and horrific crimes that newspapers had been delivering to an

eager public since their inception in the seventeenth century. Challenging Rolf Engelsing's often cited account of a shift from "intensive" to "extensive" reading over the course of the eighteenth century, Freedman thus shows how this particular piece of news was not new at all but, in a sense, a mere repetition of literary forms long since familiar to the reading public. Freedman roots his analysis in a thorough understanding of the world of eighteenth-century newspapers and the eighteenth-century book trade, and this makes eminent sense, particularly given that it is Friedrich Nicolai, the Berlin publisher and advocate par excellence of the critical power of print, who figures as one of *A Poisoned Chalice*'s main protagonists. As Freedman illustrates, the debates between Nicolai and Lavater did not directly involve issues of print. Indeed, Lavater relied as much on print as did Nicolai. But it was the potential of print to disseminate the spirit of critical thinking—which Freedman defines with reference to Kant, among others—that was very much at stake in the debate between the two.

Lavater, whose sermons circulated rapidly through the German book trade in thousands of copies, interpreted the poisoning affair in theological terms, claiming that it thwarted all attempts at rational understanding. For Lavater, this crime found an equivalent only in the betrayal of Jesus by Judas and thus had to be seen as a more general sign of crisis, a symptom of the general depravity threatening both Zurich and the entirety of modern Christendom. Not surprisingly, Nicolai disregarded Lavater's concerns with diabolic evil entirely and offered what he presented as a thoroughly rational explanation for the alleged crime. This prompted Lavater in turn to view his opponent as little more than an accomplice of the devil, an *Aufklärer* who personified precisely that disregard for the foundations of Christian faith apparent in the act of poisoning itself. Confronting this sinister affront to the blood of Christ in this manner, Lavater found himself able to vindicate God (and the apparent absence of God's intervention in the case of the poisoning) only by attacking the *Aufklärung* and its reinterpretation of Protestant theological orthodoxy. As Freedman demonstrates in his careful reading of these polemics, however, Lavater's diatribes against Nicolai were more an internal critique of the Enlightenment than a rejection of everything it stood for. Indeed, for all his suspicions of the subversive power of enlightened critique, Lavater managed to out-enlighten the enlighteners. He exposed major blind spots in Nicolai's thinking, both his prejudice that the crime had to have a rational explanation and his complete inability to deal with the possibility

of evil. It is in this sense that the affair of the poisoned chalice brought the limits of Enlightenment to the foreground and deserves to be studied alongside other major attempts in the 1770s and 1780s to examine the limits of reason.

One of the great advantages of Freedman's study is its compactness. In just 160 pages of text, the book offers a compelling reconstruction of the affair of the poisoned communion wine and lucidly, clearly and elegantly links this narrative to the major philosophical issues that the affair raised among its contemporaries. Among recent books on the literary and intellectual culture of the German Enlightenment, there is to my mind none that is more readable, and there are few, if any, that are a better read. The flip side to the economy with which the book makes its argument is that so many of the complex relationships between the controversy over the poisoned communion wine and other public debates of this era never get fleshed out in as dynamic a fashion as would be possible in a longer study. Freedman's comments on the way generic narratives about crime typical of the early modern news media helped determine the reception of this particular tale beg for a broader comparison with other discourses on evil, crime and punishment during this period. Clearly, the fascination with infanticide in the dramas of the 1770s is one case in point, as are numerous other literary representations of crime during this period or the psychological interest in crime in Karl Philipp Moritz's influential *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1783-93). On a similar note, the parallels Freedman draws at times between Nicolai's probing of the lim-

its of scientific understanding and Kant's critical philosophy are illuminating and fascinating, particularly since so many commentators on the *Aufklärung* have tended to position the Königsberg philosopher at the other end of the spectrum from the Berlin bookseller. This relationship, too, would warrant further reflection, as would the parallel Freedman gestures to between the debates over the poisoning in Zurich and the controversies surrounding the Reimarus fragments, which cost Lessing his privilege to publish on theological matters. And one wonders as well about the relationship between the discourse Freedman reconstructs and the large-scale debates provoked by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* just two years earlier in 1774, debates in which Freedman's protagonist Nicolai also played a role. Ultimately, though, these are all questions that *A Poisoned Chalice* raises rather than any of the book's weaknesses, a testament to the broad implications of Freedman's contribution to scholarship on the late-eighteenth-century public sphere in the German-speaking world. This carefully crafted and exceedingly well-written book represents a welcome addition to the field, one that will be able to draw large numbers of readers into the vibrant complexity of the German Enlightenment.

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Citation: Jonathan M. Hess. Review of Freedman, Jeffrey, *A Poisoned Chalice*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

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